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LESS BLACK THAN WE'RE PAINTED

By JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF "LOST SIR MASSINGBERD," "WHAT HE COST HER," "FALLEN
FORTUNES," "BY PROXY," ETC.

SECOND EDITION.



IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

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"After all, man is man ; he is not wicked, and he is not good ; by no means white as snow, but by no means black as coal ; black and white, piebald, striped, dubious."—SWINBURNE.

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LESS BLACK THAN WE'RE PAINTED.

CHAPTER I.

A SERIOUS DINNER.

THERE is a Gresham Street in the West End of London as well as in the East, but of a very different type. It must have been named after some person who had no connection, however indirect, with commerce; for it is aristocratic to its very scrapers. The houses are huge, but gloomy; their windows (far from large, and rarely of plate glass) have probably never beheld an omnibus. The walls are black with age and soot, for nothing is

ever done to them in the way of painting ; only from time to time some men come with a ladder and affix, with as little noise as possible, a hatchment to the front of them. I don't know the time that hatchments ought to 'hang' (as the cooks say), but those in Gresham Street remain a very long time, so much so that to an irreverent mind the neighbourhood often resembles a congeries of public-houses, with Death for their signboards. In front of them still project the iron 'quencher,' formerly used for extinguishing the flambeaux of the footmen. There is gas in the street, of course, but in the mansions themselves one would as soon expect to find petroleum in domestic use.

The wave of fashion has retired from the place and left it stranded ; but it has a dignity of its own that rises above all frivolous change and contemns it. Even in summer the doors do not stand open as in Belgravia, affording to the ravished eye the spectacle of powdered minions in splendid apparel ; they swing noiselessly back

as some ancient chariot with far-spreading hammer-cloth stops to discharge its stately burthen—generally a dowager—and having swallowed her, they close again. The process is very similar to what will happen when she pays her last visit to her ancestral mausoleum.

No house agent can appraise these tenements, for they are never sold. Such a sacrilege as a sale by auction, at all events, has never been heard of in connection with them. If they are disposed of it is by 'private contract,' which is kept as dead a secret as the existence of the family spectre—of which there are, no doubt, many specimens in this locality. The mansions are all freehold. A ninety-nine years' lease would be looked upon in Gresham Street as evanescent an arrangement as is taking lodgings by the week in Piccadilly.

The furniture is solid, ponderous, and would be invaluable in Paris—for barricades; otherwise it has nothing Parisian about it. The mirrors, though not numer-

ous, are very large, and they intensify the gloom by multiplying it.

In the drawing-room of No. 80, which would with ease accommodate two hundred persons—and if fashion held sway there would doubtless be made, at what is very literally termed ‘a pinch,’ to hold five hundred—there are, on the evening on which our story opens, but three individuals.

An old lady, with snow-white hair and venerable appearance, but whose attitude, as she sits in her stiff-backed chair, still shows strength and vigour, is engaged upon some fancy work—an occupation, one would imagine, fitter for younger eyes. Her dress is handsome, but old-fashioned—though in a year or two it will be once more the rage, for it is made up of those recurrent materials, silk and lace. Lace on her shoulders, lace on the high collar round her neck, and a lace cap that looks yellower than even time has made it, by contrast with her silver hair. Though dignified looking, her face has an air at

once pathetic and benevolent ; like one who, having known trouble herself for many a year, recognises its trace in others, and has pity on them.

The second occupant of the apartment is also a lady ; she is much younger than her companion — indeed, she is scarcely beyond middle age — and yet in some respects exhibits fewer signs of youth. The elder has a bright eye, a cheerful voice, and at times, though rarely, a genial smile, that show the heart within is still warm and tender. The younger is very grave and taciturn ; her expression, though not morose, is austere ; the face, thin, pale, and delicate, bears tokens of physical pain ; her voice, though sad and gentle, is, for a woman's, singularly resolute. There is firmness, too, for those who can read it, in the lines about her mouth. Curiously enough, while the elder lady is doing fancy work, the younger is stitching with needle and thread at some plain linen. Her attire, too, has no ornament about it whatever, unless a large, white cross suspended

by a ribbon from her neck can be so entitled. She is dressed in the close-fitting, black and grey garments of a Protestant Sister of Mercy.

The third person in the room, and who has only just entered it, is one of severe and pompous aspect, and would perhaps be set down by a superficial observer as the spiritual superior of the other two, whereas he is, in fact, but Mr. Duncombe, the butler.

‘Dinner is served, my lady.’

‘Does his lordship then dine at the club?’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Then we may as well go down, Edith.’

This formula, so far as Duncombe and his mistress are concerned, has been repeated every evening for the last twenty years, for, as a matter of fact, Lord Earnshaw, his master, has been dead for that period. Every one knows it except her ladyship, who still clings to the fond belief that he is yet alive, and acting as he was wont to do.

while in the flesh. If this were so, nothing is certainly less likely than that he should be dining at home. Lord Earnshaw had never been a domestic man, and had left the world under the saddest circumstances—with another man's wife. She had joined him on board his yacht, in which they had set sail for the Mediterranean, and the *Sans Souci* had gone down 'with all her crew complete' (six men and a boy, besides her master and his mistress) in the Bay of Biscay. The tidings were broken to his widow, doubtless as tenderly as might be, but the sorrow and the shame were more than she could bear. Something, it was popularly said, had given way in her brain in connection with this particular subject, while all else was firm. Psychologically this did not seem improbable, for the love she had borne her husband had been a thing apart from the rest of her life, and, though that chord was snapped, it might well be that the other strings of being remained unbroken, though, alas! without their music. He had left

her for the last time with some reference to dining at his club—he was, in fact, about to start for Southampton—and to this her mind attached itself. She imagined every day that this had happened but a few hours ago, and her servants were instructed not to interfere with her fond delusion. His lordship's study was arranged each morning, as it was wont to be when he had tenanted it; his newspaper was cut and placed upon his desk; his boots in winter time put near the fire.

Some people thought that of late years the truth had slowly dawned upon his unhappy widow. She put the same question to the butler every evening still, but without the sigh that had of old accompanied it. The poor soul, they said, though conscious of her weakness, felt ashamed, after so many years, to acknowledge it. But Edith Talbot, her niece, was not of this opinion. She believed Lady Earnshaw's faith was as firm as ever that her husband was in the flesh, and only thought that he was neglecting her somewhat more than

usual. Under these circumstances, it behoved her, for his sake, not to appear to pine, but to bear herself bravely. On other points, Lady Earnshaw was as sane as other people, and on some much saner. She had had in early life a genuine gift of humour; and even now an occasional gleam would leap out from some corner of her mind, half playful, half pathetic. Her heart was as tender to the woes of others as before it had been broken, but its solitudes had ceased. She had no nervous fears—of old she had been full of them—for the welfare of those she loved; she let the world move on around her, without attempting to set right what was amiss in it; and she smiled, though very kindly, at those who still endeavoured so to do.

Indeed, it was difficult for any two good women to have less in common than Lady Earnshaw and 'Sister Edith' (as she called herself), but each esteemed and loved the other. Edith, though herself a person of strong practical piety, had a secret respect for the delusion under which

the elder lady laboured with respect to her dead husband. 'It was better,' she said, 'to treat the dead as living, than the living, as so many did, as though they were in another world, or not of the same flesh and blood.' Nay, though she knew her uncle by marriage to have been an absolutely worthless scoundrel, she did not think him past praying for even yet; whereas her aunt, had she thought her husband dead, would certainly have ceased to pray for him.

Almost every act of the lives of these two persons was performed with a difference. As they sat down to table, for example, on the present occasion, Lady Earnshaw bent down over her plate, murmured a few words, as it seemed, to the napkin outside of it, and then proceeded to help the soup. Sister Edith, on the other hand, stood up, folded her hands across her bosom, and uttered a long though inaudible benediction.

'My dear,' said her hostess, smiling, and speaking in the French language, as they

always did before the servants, 'you remind me of old Lord Earnshaw's chaplain, who used to say his form of grace according to the character of the fare set before him. If it was a family dinner, he said, "For what we are going to receive;" if he saw the long glasses which foretold some sparkling beverage, he would begin, "Bountiful Jehovah."'

'I am afraid he must have been an indifferènt priest, Aunt Mildred.'

'Well, he was certainly not very devout; he only reminded me of yourself, of course, in the particular I mentioned.'

'Do I then alter my grace if there are long glasses?' inquired Sister Edith, in that somewhat lugubrious tone which religious persons assume when respect forbids them to reprove a transgressor.

'My dear Edith, you are very literal,' said the old lady, laughing. 'I only meant the parallel to extend to the change of grace, not to the reason of it. I noticed that you said a longer one than usual to-day. Is it a feast of the Church, or a fast, or what?'

'It is neither one nor the other, Aunt

Mildred. Nor was my grace longer than ordinary. If you really wish to know, and will not mock at me for telling you, I was saying a short prayer."

'A thousand pardons, dear' (she reached out her thin white hand, sparkling with jewels, and laid it on her companion's arm); 'I hope you were praying for me, for Heaven knows I need it, nor could I have a better earthly intercessor.'

The tone of the speaker had every sign of genuineness, and curiously enough that was the very thing in it that most displeased the other; she did not like having, as it were, a compliment paid her at the expense of her principles. Who was she that she should mediate between this woman and her Creator? Why did she not consult some authorised agent, such as Gerald Vane, whom she called 'father,' though he was younger than herself?

'Ah! dear Aunt Mildred, I wish I could get you to think as I do; to be convinced of the truth. I have a book upstairs called "Aid to the Doubtful," written originally

in the Latin tongue, but which Mr. Vane has translated——'

'My dear Edith,' interrupted Lady Earnshaw, smiling, 'I am too old to mend. At my time of life I cannot think of beginning a new course of theology. Let me give you some turbot.'

It was a comfort to the old lady that her niece was not forbidden fish : she seemed to be debarred from so many things for the good of her soul.

There was silence for a little, which the hostess was the first to break.

'I wonder how Dick is getting on with his young friend to-night?'

'I have been thinking of that, Aunt Mildred. Don't you think he is a little young to be dining at a club?'

'Well, he is nearly seventeen, and has left Eton, though, it is true, only a few days. He cannot be tied to one's apron-strings now he is no longer a schoolboy. His friend Mr. Greene, who is at college, asks him to dine with him. What would you have had me do?'

‘The poor boy is so thoughtless, and I am afraid has so little principle—though, indeed, that is not his fault; and he has never known a mother’s care.’

‘That is only too true. But even supposing myself to be in his mother’s place, here is an old schoolfellow asks the lad to dine. Should I not be wounding his *amour propre*—a feeling that is perhaps strongest at his age—in saying “No;” and then, perhaps,’ added the old lady, naïvely, ‘it is just possible he might have gone all the same.’

‘Oh, I hope not, Aunt Mildred; I trust not. He is self-willed, and, I fear, wild, but not so wicked as that.’

Lady Earnshaw smiled again, and this time her smile had a touch of bitterness.

‘If Dick is wicked at his age, God help him, and forgive grown men. I think you are disposed to take a microscopic view of human frailty, instead of using what from your own elevation above the follies of the world would more become you—the telescope.’

'I beseech you do not talk like that. Elevation! My feet are set in mire and clay.'

'Well, the soil is even worse, at all events, on which the rest of us are standing. As to Dick, if you objected to his going out, why did you not advise him to stay at home?'

'I advise him? You know that I have no authority. Nay, that his father has warned the poor lad against me as though I were a serpent.'

'Poor Francis! It seems so strange to me that you good people should quarrel so, even when you are of the same blood.'

'It is written, Aunt Mildred,' answered the other gravely, 'that for the good cause a man's foes shall be those of his own household.'

'There is also the text, "Let brotherly love continue,"' replied the elder lady, dryly. 'You have eaten next to nothing, my dear, as usual. Will you not take one glass of wine?'

Sister Edith shook her head and smiled.

‘You know I never drink wine, Aunt Mildred.’

‘Then we will go upstairs. Duncombe, you will sit up for Master Richard to-night.’

‘Very good, my lady.’

The deceased Lord Earnshaw, when he came home from his club, was supposed to use his own (skeleton) key.



CHAPTER II.

SISTER EDITH'S VIGIL.

THE two ladies, when they returned to the drawing-room, resumed the work in which they had been respectively engaged; albeit the younger at least would have scorned to call it by that name. Her real work lay among the tenants of the lanes and alleys of the town, and what she did, for the same clients, with her thread and needle, was, by comparison, recreation. Perhaps the hardest task she had to do within doors was to restrain herself from advocating her own opinions with a vehemence that under the circumstances would have been unbecoming: the Gallio-like indifference of her venerable relative to

matters that were nearer to her than life itself, was one of the crosses that Sister Edith had to bear.

‘I had a letter from Francis this morning—and not a very satisfactory one,’ observed the elder lady presently.

‘Yes?’

This monosyllable was full of significance; it implied first an absence of surprise, and secondly a willingness, if the other pleased, to listen—but under protest; as though nothing coming from the quarter in question could possess any personal interest.

‘I really do pity that poor boy, having to spend his holidays, or at least the time before he goes to college, at Durnton Regis.’

‘I always did pity him, Aunt Mildred.’

‘Such a change as he must find it after Eton; not a soul seems ever to come to the Tower—except Mr. Freeman.’

Sister Edith uttered an ejaculation of disapproval.

‘Yes; I must say there I agree with you,’ continued the old lady. ‘That man

seems to have picked out, as it were, the worst part of the Christian faith, to form a religion for himself, and he's a toad-eater too, which is a very loathsome form of reptile. It is wonderful that Francis does not see it.'

'He sees it, aunt, but fosters the man in spite of it,' said Sister Edith, quietly. 'He considers him a "pillar" and a "shining light."'

'I wonder how it is that the clergy are now so puffed up,' mused her ladyship. 'In my young days, till a man was made a bishop, no one thought anything of him, and not so very much even then. My lord's father, indeed, looked upon his chaplain as a sort of link between the drawing-room and the servants' hall ; but that was an extreme case. Now, half one's relatives are preached to death by them, and the other half daren't so much as eat or drink without permission of their clergyman—just as though they had taken degrees in physic instead of divinity.'

Sister Edith did not reply; she was con-

scious that her aunt was referring to the feasts of the Church, and possibly even to the Rev. Gerald Vane himself, her own spiritual superior.

‘Is Richard like what his father was, as a boy, Aunt Mildred?’ inquired she presently.

‘Yes, though with a difference. He is not quite so handsome, but then he has a more frank expression. Even in his wildest days your brother had rather an austere look. He took his pleasures sadly. But the clear skin and olive complexion, the bright brown eyes, the mass of hair with that natural wave in it, are reproductions of his father’s characteristics. Francis was never winning, to my mind, as this boy is, though my poor Mary—his cousin too, which ought in itself to have been a barrier—thought otherwise.’ Here she sighed, and shook her grey head.

‘I think Francis always loved his wife,’ said Sister Edith, gently.

‘Yes, after a fashion. He was faithful to her, no doubt, and was sorry when she

died. For my part, I am so wicked as to have preferred him in his unregenerate days to when he became a chosen vessel.'

'I trust Dick will not be "wild,"' said Sister Edith, softly.

'Let us hope not, but especially that he may not grow tame in his father's way. By-the-bye, Edith, there was something in your brother's letter which I must needs speak of, though I think it in bad taste and quite unnecessary. He begs his boy may not be sent to church to-morrow in your company—that you won't take him to St. Ethelburga's.'

'Lest he should learn idolatry, I suppose,' said Edith, bitterly.

'That is the very expression Francis used,' answered Lady Earnshaw. 'I don't approve of the place myself, as you are aware, but I think such a restriction ill-advised. I was obliged to mention it, however, lest you should have thought of taking him.'

Edith said nothing, but her work did not progress for several minutes; her tears

damped the linen and rusted the needle. She felt it very hard ; for this boy, who had already given signs of waywardness and wilfulness, was as the apple of her eye to her. The love that the father had rejected almost with loathing, she had laid up as it were in store for the son ; and it was her dearest wish to win him, first to heaven, and next to herself. She had secretly looked forward to going with him to church upon the morrow, and to praying for him, while she looked on his bright face, as a mother prays in the presence of her child. And now this was not to be.

As the clock struck ten, Lady Earnshaw, as usual, put away her tambour frame, and lit her bed candle with her own hands ; for notwithstanding her age, she was independent, and disliked the attentions even of a servant.

‘If I might advise you, Edith,’ said she, as they embraced, ‘you will retire also ; you look pale and worn, and if, as I suppose, you mean to attend matins to-morrow morning, your night will be, even as it is, a short one.’

'I shall be in my own room almost as soon as you, dear aunt,' returned Edith; and while she spoke, she put away the square of linen on which she was engaged in a huge ottoman, the unsuspected receptacle of that sort of plain work, and followed her relative upstairs.

Her own bedchamber was a large one, immediately over that of her aunt, but arranged in a very different style. In the latter there was a profusion of massive furniture, antiquated in design and oppressive as to its effect, but on the whole it was comfortable. The canopied bed was at least warm and soft; the arm-chairs, though ugly, were roomy and well stuffed. But Sister Edith's room was almost bare. The floor, though scrupulously clean, had no carpet save in the centre of the room, on which stood a writing-table. The bed was without curtains and very narrow. There were but two chairs, high-backed and cane-bottomed. On the walls were a few engravings of a mediæval type, and all on sacred subjects; they had doubtless their

merits from an artistic point of view, but the figures were hard, cold, and (to profane eyes) much out of the perspective, while every one portrayed looked intensely miserable. The only article of beauty, or luxury, was a huge crucifix of ivory, which stood in a sort of alcove on a ground of purple velvet, and with a cushion beneath it of the same costly material. To this object the occupant of the apartment reverently turned her eyes whenever she entered or quitted it, and always with a profound obeisance.

Altogether, it was no wonder that Sister Edith's Protestant friends were wont to speak of her as 'going over;' or that her brother Francis, as we have hinted, concluded she had already gone, not only to Rome, but even farther.

It seemed she had no intention for the present of retiring to rest, for after one glance to left and right through the open window—for it was still early autumn—she sat down and began to read. Every one knows how difficult it is to keep the atten-

tion fixed, even on an attractive volume, when the mind is anxious, as was now the case with Sister Edith's; yet, to look at her, one would have concluded she had no thought within her, independent of the occupation in which she was engaged. As a matter of fact, she was not greatly interested in the subject of her study—that very 'Aid to the Doubtful' of which she had spoken so eulogistically to her aunt; it was Father Vane's own book, and so far had a strong claim on her attention, but a translation from the Latin is not generally a work of absorbing interest—and besides, she had herself no doubts. And yet from habit, from that principle of overcoming nature, or, at the worst, of seeming to do so, which had become her rule in life, she sat with the book before her as resolutely as though both were carved in stone. Nature, however, is difficult to expel—they failed to do it of old, says the poet, with a pitchfork, and the crozier of the bishop has no better luck—and Sister Edith's thoughts wandered though her gaze was fixed. She was

thinking of the truant boy, who had not yet returned home (her ears had never ceased to listen for his step upon the pavement), and her heart was heavy within her on his account. Young as he was, he had from a child been a source to her of deep anxiety. She had yearned to take his mother's place from the moment he had lost her, but that had been denied her (indeed, of late years his father had cut off all connection between them), yet before he went to school she had had opportunities of reading his character, which she had done of course after her own lights. The irreverence of the boy, as she termed his naturalness, had shocked her. There now came into her mind some examples of it. He had attempted on one occasion, at the immature age of five, to carve the joint at luncheon. His father had put him quietly aside, with 'The master of the house always carves, my boy.'

'Who carves in heaven, papa?' he had inquired.

It was a child's question, which would have provoked a smile among sensible

folks. It is doing no wrong to either Mr. Francis Talbot or his sister to say that, differing as they did in almost all matters of opinion, they agreed in this, to ignore common sense as much as possible. Even Mr. Talbot, however, perceived that his son's question had better be answered categorically, so he answered, 'The Master.'

'Then he must have a big knife,' returned the child.

These remarks of Richard—for there had been many of the like kind—had given Sister Edith a great deal of pain. She saw in them a nature far too much 'at ease in Zion,' and subsequent events had confirmed her fears. Master Dick had shown himself something worse than irreverent with reference to sacred things, or what Sister Edith considered as such; and his father had not corrected him—in some matters he had even encouraged him, out of opposition to herself. In all things connected with his son he was lax and lenient, though stern enough in his dealings with the rest of the world.

Richard's stay for a few days at his grandmother's in Gresham Street, on his leaving Eton, had been looked forward to by Sister Edith as an opportunity for regaining her old influence over the lad; but it was doubtful whether he had not already passed beyond it. It is but just to say that she had no idea of converting him to her particular views, but only to win him from evil ways, for that he had fallen into such she was well-nigh convinced. He had been flogged at school—a punishment which, in its disgrace, she considered little inferior to being placed in the pillory; and once he had come home to the Tower in what might almost be termed 'custody.' His private tutor, at least, had accompanied him, bearing an intimation from the school authorities that it would be better for all parties if Master Richard Talbot were quietly withdrawn by his friends. This catastrophe had, it is true, been averted, and Eton had once more taken to her bosom her prodigal son; but the sin that had almost procured his expulsion was

no less, in Sister Edith's view, than if it had borne that shameful fruit. Master Richard, being but sixteen years of age, had got drunk at that famous inn 'The Christopher,' at an entertainment given to some boon companions, and on being asked his name by a master of the college, had replied without hesitation, 'Beelzebub.' And now the clock of the neighbouring church was chiming midnight, and this young reprobate had not yet come home. What orgie might he not be engaged in? To what unimaginable depravity might he not have succumbed?

As the last solemn stroke of the hour died away, Sister Edith took up her reading-lamp, and with a glance, as usual, at the symbol of her faith, which had something of appeal this time, as well as reverence in it, she left the room, and softly descended the stairs. All was silent in the house, but from the basement, as she descended the back stairs, there came to her ear a stertorous sound as though the kitchen clock was choking. Mr. Dun-

combe was fast asleep in an arm-chair before the fire, and snoring as only a very plethoric person in a posture favourable to the development of that gift can snore.

‘Duncombe ! Duncombe ! *Duncombe !*’ ejaculated Sister Edith.

‘Aw right : whatch is it ? Goodness me, Miss Edith, I beg your pardon.’

‘There is no offence, Duncombe ; I came down to say you need not sit up any longer for Master Richard. I will do that myself.’

‘But you’ll be so tired, miss ; I’ve been used to keep awake o’ nights for my betters.’

‘No matter ; you have your work to do to-morrow, and I have none. I will let Master Richard in—only you need not say anything about it.’

She meant, or thought she meant, that he was to be silent about this delegation of duty to her, but he replied, to her annoyance, ‘Oh yes, ma’am ; I quite understand. Young people will be young people, and Master Richard is forgetting

how time flies, no doubt. There is no need, as you say, to make a fuss about it ; and her ladyship shall never know.'

Considering his slumberous condition, Mr. Duncombe had really divined the thoughts of his young mistress pretty accurately. 'I am afraid, miss,' added he, 'you will have to sit in the dining-room, or you will not hear the bell.' How Mr. Duncombe himself had arranged matters for hearing the bell when he was sound asleep, Edith did not think it necessary to inquire.

She took her lamp and book into the room indicated, and prepared to continue her vigil. Her motive for so doing was partly, as she had said, to relieve the man from his watch ; for she thought it wrong that an old servant should be kept out of his bed by her nephew's dissipation, but chiefly that there should be no witness but herself of Dick's return. It was probable that it might be at some disreputable hour in the morning, and even possible that he might have taken too much to drink. How-

ever astray Sister Edith may have gone in her religious faith, the principle of self-sacrifice, on which all goodness worthy of the name is built, was strong within her; her merit, however, was less than in some other cases, for by long use of the virtue she had almost become unconscious of its exercise. She denied herself, as other people please themselves, mechanically.

A dining-room is rarely a pleasant place wherein to pass the small hours of the morning; and the dining-room in Gresham Street was especially melancholy. Its vast mahogany table, so far from being suggestive of banqueting (of which, indeed, it had been innocent for the last twenty years), seemed adapted rather for the coffin of its proprietor, while all the accessories—the dark oak paneling, the sombre curtains, and the ancestral pictures on the walls—would have suited admirably with a lying-in-state. But Sister Edith, who had been used to keep the watches of the night by the beds of the sick and dying, wasted no thought upon these unpleasant sur-

roundings, while if she was impatient for her nephew's return, it was solely for his own sake. Not till she had finished her book, indeed, did she allow herself the luxury of thought at all; and even then not without some scruple—for she had been warned by her spiritual adviser against a tendency she had to 'dream.'

It was, however, but her actual past that now obtruded itself upon her. Her mind reverted to the days of her youth, when she had been her father's favourite, and as he was wont to call her after her mother's death, and not without reason, 'his right hand.' At that time Francis Talbot had been a very different man from what he had since become; he was then a spendthrift and a profligate, and it had been her mission to excuse him, so far as was possible, to his outraged parent. She had not been credited even then with the exercise of any such good office. Her brother had been jealous of her influence over the old man, and had accused her not only of hypocrisy (which was to be expected) but of

self-seeking—of wishing to ingratiate herself with her father at his expense. This had been terrible to her; not on account of its falsehood, but because of certain hints that had been dropped by persons who had obtained great influence over her, that a disposition in her favour of her father's wealth would be of advantage to the best interests of mankind, while its reverting to her brother's hands would be an unmitigated evil. These hints had been very skilfully wrapped up, and she had been enabled to ignore them, but they had lodged in a pigeon-hole of her mind, and gave her trouble there. Then suddenly Francis had had his 'call,' as he termed it—which, whencesoever it had come, had certainly carried him in a very different direction from that he had hitherto pursued. It had not, however, reconciled him to his father, who perhaps suspected its genuineness; while it had made those persons still more resolute against him of whose influence with Edith we have already spoken. She had been warned, and this

time broadly, that it was her duty to prevent, if possible, her father's estate passing into the hands of an enemy of the Church.

Edith Talbot shrank from harming her brother's interests; she shrank from harming those of the Church; and she was absolutely indifferent to her own. How she would have eventually decided is doubtful, but at this critical period Mrs. Francis Talbot, who had been hitherto childless, gave birth to a son. From that moment all thoughts of enriching the Church at the expense of her brother vanished from Edith's mind. She felt that she could never deprive that innocent child of any portion of his birthright. This confidence was, however, by no means shared by Francis. For his own part, he was dead to the world, and worldly goods were dross in his eyes; but he shuddered at the thought of the wealth of the Talbots passing into Jesuits' hands. Rather to the surprise of Algernon Talbot's friends and neighbours, it was found when he died that this misfortune had not taken place. By a will

made many years back, he left the greater part of his property and all his landed estate, to his son, with only a moderate provision for his daughter. This circumstance had somewhat mollified her brother's resentment against her, but he still believed in his heart that she had done her best to disinherit him. It had not been so, as we know. Her love for her father, whom she had tended through a miserable illness with unflinching devotion, had had no sordid taint. She was thinking of him now ; picturing him in his arm-chair in the old library at the Tower with his dogs about him, and herself reading aloud to him some record of the chase. He had had no sympathy with her in spiritual things ; they were matters, indeed, on which he was disinclined to think at all. But when she thought of him, she felt, in spite of all teachings to the contrary, that there were other ways of reaching heaven beside the one that she had chosen. He had loved her, and trusted her, and died with his feeble hand in hers.

Five o'clock ! How clearly the strokes fell on the silent town upon its Sabbath. In half an hour it would be time for her to go to matins. With that duty, no other—short of one of life or death—was ever permitted by her to interfere. She went upstairs and prepared herself to go out, though with a sinking heart. She stood in fear of two things. Richard might come home in her absence, when it would be impossible to conceal from Lady Earnshaw the hour at which he returned ; and, secondly, some accident might have happened to him. It was characteristic of her, and her peculiar training, that this apprehension was on the whole the lesser one of the two. Had she been his mother—and her solicitude for him was almost as great as though she was—it would by this time have swallowed up all others. But death itself was in her eyes far less terrible than shame and sin ; for she knew them both. Her path had lain among them, as the course of a pure streamlet lies under thorns, briars, and between rugged rocks.

The vilest had respected her ; the most brutal had not molested her. Her calling had not indeed been always welcomed as one of mercy and love, but it had been tacitly acknowledged to be well-meaning, and there is no doubt that her professional costume—though to many of us it seems to protest too much—had been a protection to her. With her hood thrown over her head, and draped in simple black and grey, she now descends the stairs like a good ghost, whose heart is still with the struggling world that she has left ; she softly opens the door (she has a latch-key of her own to let herself in with) and steps into the empty street. She glances quickly to left and right, but no living creature is to be seen ; she stands, and for an instant listens intently for a quick young footstep, but no sound breaks the silence of the Sabbath morn. Then, with a deep sigh, she hurries on through short cuts that she knows, and presently comes within hearing of a little bell that does not peal, nor toll, nor ring, but tinkles like the sheep-bell

heard among the solitary hills, and marks the presence of a little fold (or, so it seems to her) of Christ's own Church. Then suddenly it is swallowed up by another sound, a bacchanalian song—some 'strange experience of Moll and Bess'—which breaks out in a shrill, clear voice and fills the street; she turns the corner and meets the singer face to face, a handsome lad, with feverish eyes, and haggard face, who has evidently kept vigil like herself, though after another fashion.

'Oh, Dick!' she cries, a volume of reproof in her sad tones.

'By jingo!' says the boy. Then, with sudden consciousness of the pain in the other's face, 'I'm awfully sorry, Aunt Edie, I am indeed.'



CHAPTER III.

A PICKLE.

It was scarcely possible for two persons of one race to present a greater contrast to one another than did Edith Talbot and her nephew as they stood together looking into each other's eyes, and, after the first shock of meeting, silent. The woman in her robe of charity, pale, pained, and austere reproachful; the boy, in evening dress, rich with studs and watchguard, but with an air of careless fashion seldom seen in adolescence (a period of life which is generally conscious of fine raiment), and with a smile of roguish humour, which not even the seriousness of his position could banish from his pleasant face.

‘You will break my heart, Dick, and the hearts of all who love you,’ said Edith, slowly. ‘Come with me.’

She would have taken his hand, but with a boy’s pride he offered her his arm instead, and thus they moved on together. The bell had again made itself heard, and for the first time attracted the boy’s attention.

‘You are going to matins, Aunt Edie, I suppose,’ said he, gently.

‘I am, and you are going with me. I cannot say—I do not feel equal to saying—what is in my heart about you. Perhaps in God’s house,’ she murmured, half aside, ‘and by the mouth of his appointed minister, some good seed may be sown even in this neglected soil that may bear fruit. Don’t speak, Dick, think; search your own soul, and pray for grace to cleanse it.’

‘I’m awfully sorry, Aunt Edie; I really am. I know I’m a bad lot compared to you; and if you think that matins will do me good, though I’m uncommon sleepy—but, I say, isn’t this St. Ethelburga’s?’

‘Hush ! yes.’ They were drawing near the church, though slowly, for Master Richard was by no means walking at the same lively pace he had used when his aunt met him, and which had seemed to keep time to his reckless song.

‘But the governor wrote to me that I was not to go to St. Ethelburga’s.’

‘That is true, I had forgotten,’ said Sister Edith, stopping short. ‘I must not make you disobey your father.’

‘I’ll do it, you know, for your sake, Aunt Edie,’ observed the young gentleman, placidly, while a smile twinkled at the corners of his mouth ; ‘I’ll do anything to please you.’

‘It was not to please myself, Dick, that I was going to take you—alas, how far he is’ (she went on unconsciously) ‘even from understanding what is right ! There is not even the germ of good.’

‘I say again, Aunt Edie, I am a bad lot. But even the devil, you know, is not so black as he’s painted.’ He was perfectly serious ; quite unconscious of the humorous inappro-

priateness of his *you know* in the case of the person he was addressing. 'Of course it's late, a great deal later than I thought it was ; but I have really not been doing any particular harm. I met some old Eton fellows at Greene's, and went home with them to their hotel, and we played cards——'

'Cards !' groaned Sister Edith. 'You played cards, and on Sunday morning.'

'Well, we began on Saturday night. And Sunday don't begin till one gets up, you see. If one sat up on Sunday night till past twelve, and began then, I should say that was playing on Sunday, if you like. It would be the letter versus the spirit. Now you have been to bed, and I have not.'

'I have not been to bed, Dick ; I have been sitting up for you all night.'

'Oh ! Aunt Edie, how awfully good of you ! Then you sent Duncombe to bed in order that you might let me in without grandmamma's knowing about my being so late. You are a regular trump—I mean

an angel. I don't deserve to have such an aunt. What a beast I was to be saying, "Just one more deal" (for I was the one that always wanted it) when you were waiting up for me all the while—but then, you know, I didn't know it.'

'My sitting up is nothing, Dick. I would sit up for a week, not to screen you, indeed (as you imagine), from the consequences of your misconduct, but to save you from your own self.'

'I am a selfish beggar, I know,' observed Dick, penitently. 'I am afraid I have kept you from matins, for one thing.'

'Yes, the door is shut; it is now too late,' she sighed, as though her words had suggested something deeper than their ordinary meaning. 'We will come home at once, and you can get to bed for an hour or two.'

'And you, Aunt Edie?' There was genuine tenderness in the lad's tone; it was her personal kindness that moved him most, but he had a glimmer of the spiritual solicitude that was agitating his companion

upon his account. 'I hope you will also get some rest. I have told you the worst about myself, I have indeed. Sitting up is what every Eton fellow does when he gets a chance; and we only played six-penny loo.'

'You were playing for money then—gambling?'

'Well, you wouldn't have us play for nothing; that would be mere waste of time.'

The *naïveté* of this remark, as well as its Johnsonian wisdom, were utterly lost upon Sister Edith.

'You think it right, then, to win the money of your friends?'

'If I can get it, certainly; unhappily I had no such luck, for I lost a brace of couters.'

'A what?'

'A couple of sovereigns.'

'And where did you get the couple of sovereigns—you, who have just returned from school—to pay your debts with?'

'Well, I didn't steal them, Aunt Edie,' returned the young fellow, doggedly.

‘I wish to know, however, how you procured them.’

‘Well, really, that is Confession, and the governor is dead against it; and, besides, a fellow is not bound to criminate himself, you know; that’s the law of England.’

‘You committed a crime, then, to get possession of this money?’

‘A crime? Certainly not. I did quite right—that is, I served somebody out quite right—but then I know you wouldn’t think so.’

‘Whether you choose to tell me or not, my poor lad,’ said Sister Edith, gravely, ‘there is Someone who knows it, whose ill opinion is more to be feared than mine. I do not press you in this matter from any idle curiosity, believe me; but I have found, in my own case, when I have done amiss, that to confess it—though, indeed, it should be to some duly authorised person—makes the burthen of sin the lighter.’

‘Well, as to that, this don’t weigh upon me a feather’s weight,’ answered Dick, ‘ankly; ‘but still, you have been so

awfully good to me, Aunt Edie, that sooner than vex you, I'll tell you all about it. You see, I was "sent up" to the doctor's a week or two ago—that's the head-master, you know—and though I had a lot to say about it, and it was very hard lines, he wouldn't hear a word, and swished me.'

'Swished you?'

'Yes, that's flogged me, of course; he gave me ten cuts, and I owed him one for each of them, and now I've paid him. They cost him just a guinea a piece.'

'I don't understand, Dick.'

'Well, it's this way. When one leaves Eton for good, you call upon the doctor to wish him good-bye, and you leave ten guineas lying about somewhere (but where he finds it quick enough, I'll warrant), just as you leave a pound and a shilling at the other sort of doctor's done up in white paper; it's the usual fee to the head-master, which every fellow's governor sends him, to be given at the proper time; but it's not set down, I believe, in his college expenses. When a head-master is very displeased

with a boy's conduct while at the school, he returns him this "leaving gift," as a mark of censure. You may imagine, however, that it takes a good deal to displease him to that extent. At all events, he showed no signs of being so mortally offended with *me*. I had my own feelings, on the other hand, with respect to that "swishing," and though he saw the money wrapped up very neatly in my hand, he never saw any more of it. Perhaps he thought extreme delicacy of mind caused me to put it away behind the furniture somewhere, and he has been looking for it ever since. I only wish he may get it.'

'It appears to me, sir,' said Sister Edith, severely, 'that you have robbed either your father or your master.'

'That is not my view of the matter, Aunt Edith,' returned Dick, seriously, 'and I have really thought about it a great deal. You see the governor never expected to see his money again, and as for the doctor, he has had a fine imposed upon him for injustice.'

'He must have the money, sir, by to-morrow's post.'

'He shall have twenty-five bob of it, if you insist upon it, Aunt Edie, but the other eight pound fifteen is gone in—in lucifers and sundries.'

'In lucifers and sundries!' repeated Sister Edith, in astonished tones.

'Well, that is in miscellaneous expenses; charities, and so on. At all events, it's gone.'

'What, have you spent nearly nine pounds in the two days you have been in London?'

'Yes, and I wish I had spent the rest of it, if you are thinking of paying it to the doctor.'

'I don't know what to say, or what to do with you, Dick,' cried Sister Edith, in great perplexity.

'Say nothing at all, Aunt Edie; let by-gones be by-gones; and as for doing—just let me in with your latchkey; there's nobody stirring; and let all be forgotten and

forgiven. "Join hands and floods of tears."

She opened the door, and closed it behind them softly.

'Now, give me a kiss, Aunt Edie, and many, many thanks.'

But Sister Edith shook her head; the tears which he had so flippantly invoked were coursing down her pale cheeks.

'I can't kiss you, Dick, just now; my heart is too sore.'

'What a beast I am to have made it so. I really will be a better boy, Aunt Edie; at least I'll try.'

His bold brown eyes looked very soft and dewy, and he turned his spare, olive face towards her with a beseeching smile. It was not in woman to resist an appeal at once so penitent and so tender.

Sister Edith threw her arms about him and kissed his cheek.

'Here's the five and twenty bob,' said he, ruefully. 'You had better take it while you can, for my pockets, somehow, always seem to have a hole in them.'

‘No, Dick, no,’ she put his hand aside with a gentle touch; ‘it is not your money that I want. You shall send the doctor a cheque from me to-morrow.’

‘But I shall never save ten pounds to pay you, Aunt Edie; I never could save sixpence.’

‘Tush, tush! what matters that? If you will only try to be a good man, Dick, that will repay me a thousand times. Now go to bed, and get what rest you can.’

Dick ran upstairs like a lamplighter. ‘She’s a regular brick, is Aunt Edie, let the governor say what he likes,’ was his reflection as he threw off his clothes. ‘I felt that soft that I was within an ace of telling her what I had done with my ticker.’

For although his watch-guard had made so fine a display outside his waistcoat, there had been, alas! no watch at the end of it.



CHAPTER IV.

THE WISDOM OF THE SERPENT.

AMONG the many good gifts of the children of light, there is none that is more astounding to those of this world—when they take the trouble to note it—than their powers of physical endurance. One sees a delicate, fragile woman going out at all hours, and in the worst of weather, to carry comfort to the poor ; or another sitting up night after night in attendance on the sick. Whereas the lives of worldly folks are (to themselves) so valuable that they cannot risk much conflict with the elements, while a late rubber at the club (when one is past middle life) makes one ‘absolutely good for nothing’ for the next day ; and this is the more curious, since (as a rule) one is not

much given to fasting even on Fridays, nor to impairing one's natural vigour by stripes with a knotted cord, or the wearing of hair-shirts—practices (as one is given to understand) which are indulged in by some of the godly.

In spite of Sister Edith's vigil, for example, she appeared at the breakfast-table at the usual hour, and without any of those appearances of fatigue which a young lady who has been kept up at a ball 'till the small hours' would have been certain to exhibit. Master Richard Talbot, on the other hand, looked not only very sleepy, but slightly sheepish, for he was not sure that he was 'out of the wood,' as he expressed it, with respect to his delinquency of the previous night. His apprehensions were, however, unfounded.

'You did not come home very early last night, I am afraid, Master Dick,' was all that his grandmother said to him by way of rebuke; and he had the grace to reply that he was sorry any one should have been kept up on his account.

Duncombe smiled as he handed the muffins with the air of a faithful retainer, who can forgive a good deal to a youthful scion of his mistress' house, and nothing more was said about the matter.

Her ladyship and her grandson went to church together, and the latter found the family pew so comfortable that he took a refreshing sleep during the sermon, from which he had the good fortune, as he flattered himself, to wake at the proper moment without exciting observation. His grandmother was quite conscious of his crime ; but, as she had seen him drop half-a-crown into the collecting plate (though, to do him justice, without the least ostentation), she deemed that act of benevolence had more than counterbalanced his weakness, and forbore to reprove him. Perhaps it should be confessed that her ladyship did not herself find sermons very attractive. The vehemence with which her niece had taken one view of religious life, and her nephew (and son-in-law) the other, had made her very charitable to persons that

were not very earnest in either direction, and, in particular, she was not displeased that her grandson, notwithstanding his father's example, had shown his preference to 'good works' over 'doctrine.'

Sister Edith, of course, worshipped at St. Ethelburga's, and after service did not appear at the well-furnished luncheon-table in Gresham Street. She repaired to Ford's Alley, a neighbouring by-street, where her person was more familiar than her name, and indeed where only a few of the many who had good cause to welcome her knew her as Miss Talbot at all. The house she entered differed only from the rest of its humble neighbours in the fact that it had been painted at a recent date—a thing which had not happened to the others within the memory of man—and that, within, it was as clean as whitewash and soap could make it. The arrangements indoors were somewhat peculiar. In the low room on which the door opened from the street, there were arranged two narrow tables of deal, set forth as if for a

substantial meal, and on the forms that ran round them were seated some thirty little children. Their faces, worn and pinched by poverty and pain, showed genuine pleasure as she came in ; but they did not rise to greet her, for they were all either invalids or cripples. Perhaps not one of them had ever known what it was to have a meat dinner, well cooked, except at that house of entertainment, where nothing was charged, and everything, though plain, was of the best. To be on Sister Edith's dinner-list was an honour more coveted by the juveniles of Ford's Alley, than is admittance to the most exclusive mansions of Mayfair by the *nouveaux riches*. Those who were hale and hearty, actually envied their sick fellows, whose ailments were the passports to this Paradise. It was only the very little ones who were allowed to drum upon the table with their spoon and fork, at the spectacle of the huge joint when it was borne in triumph into the room, but the sparkling eyes of the rest expressed their rapture. For the moment

—and for twenty minutes afterwards—the crippled limb, the couch of pain, the days devoid of play, the restless nights, were all forgotten in the enjoyment of their meal. It was a pleasant sight, and yet a sad one too, when one thought of what these young lives must be to which this simple treat seemed like a foretaste of Heaven. There was an elfin look about many of the little guests, as though they had grown old ere they had emerged from childhood ; they had seen so much of the struggle for life among their elders, they had heard so much (for the poor have no reticence about such matters) of the burthen that their existence was to others, that they had become thoughtful ere most of us have need to think, and sad without having exhausted, nay, scarcely experienced a pleasure.

Strange and weird as they might look, the person who ministered to their wants—who waited while Sister Edith carved—had an appearance still more singular and even uncanny. In stature she was a dwarf, but the diminutiveness of her form excited

no astonishment, by reason of the more striking attractions of her face ; its complexion was as fair as that of a child, but the skin was a mere network of wrinkles, which yet did not give the appearance of extreme age ; indeed, she was still active and vigorous, as was evident from her bearing in the smoking joint and setting it on the table, apparently without effort. Picture to yourself one of those portraits of young girls by some ancient master, the lines and lineaments whereof survive, but the canvas of which Time has cracked in ten thousand places, and you will have an idea of the face of Susan Parkes—only the cracks, in her case, were beautifully clear. Her eyes were dark and lustrous, though her hair was grey ; and she would have been almost pretty—though in a quaint style—but for her eyebrows, which, huge and shaggy, overhung her brows like a ridge of rank grey grass, and forbade you to forget that the creature who wore them was not as others are, but what some would even call a monstrosity. She walked too

—or rather waddled—like a walking doll ; and altogether, one would have said, was a figure to make lively children laugh, and timid ones tremble. So far, however, from this was the case with her present guests, that they held Susan Parkes in a reverence such as many of them, alas ! could not pay to their own mothers, and looked upon her as an earthly giver of good, compared with whom the ‘fairy godmother’ of fiction—wherewith these poor little souls had a very slight acquaintance—sank into insignificance. We have been told, on the best authority (*i.e.*, his own), that a certain very clever fellow, who squinted, was only one quarter of an hour behind the handsomest of his sex in getting into the good graces of his fellow-creatures ; and if beauty of form has so short a start of cleverness, it has but a little longer one of goodness, which, once having overtaken it in the affections, moves on with strides that the other can never rival. The latter, indeed, is as a cut flower, which ravishes the eye at first sight, and attracts it beyond that

which is in the earth in bud, but every day it loses some charm, while every day its rival grows and blows, and when the one is stale and withered, the other is radiant and fragrant still.

‘Well, Susan, how are our young people?’ inquired Sister Edith, cheerfully, whose arrival appeared to be the signal for bringing in the joint, and who took up her place at once at the head of the table, standing.

Before Susan could reply, the children burst into a little hymn, which, in view of the beef, was unquestionably a psalm of thanksgiving, what doubt soever might have been engendered by its time and tune. A musical ear might very possibly have been dissatisfied with the performance, but the very quavering and incertitude of their tiny voices had a pathos of their own beyond the reach of art. It was not ‘a feast for the gods’ that was spread on that narrow table, and beneath that lowly roof, but it was a feast that the gods must surely have looked kindly on. When it

was over, and certain oranges had been produced, at the appearance of which the children's eyes enlarged and glistened as though they beheld the golden fruit of the Hesperides, Sister Edith turned to her assistant, and said, 'Is your sister-in-law still with you?'

'Yes, ma'am : you will find her upstairs with Lucy.'

Edith nodded, and leaving Susan to superintend the dessert (which had become a wholesale manufactory of orange 'pigs'), ascended the narrow stairs, and, knocking softly at the door, entered the room above. The apartment was barely and cheaply furnished, and resembled other rooms in the same locality save that it was scrupulously clean ; yet it was not devoid of at least one article of luxury. On the table lay an open box, in which reposed, on a cushion of velvet made to fit its form, a large and very handsome flute. This made as prominent an object in the place as a huge vase or statue would have done in a more splendid apartment. A girl, half

child, half woman, of remarkable beauty, was standing over it, and regarding it with much apparent admiration. Her frame was tall, and thin, and undeveloped; but the beauty of her face was for her years (which were but seventeen) singularly mature. Her large hazel eyes had a steadfastness in them which would have marred their comeliness had it been less complete; the lines of her mouth, notwithstanding that the lips were shaped like the bow of Cupid, were resolute almost to hardness; while her jaw—the only defect in her features—was of that massive kind which in a man we associate with obstinacy. Even now, as she looked up at the entrance of the new comer, an expression of determination, nay, even of defiance, rose into her face, which seemed to a spectator wholly uncalled for.

There was nothing in Sister Edith's mien, nor in her salutation, to suggest antagonism; indeed, her words were not spoken to the girl at all (though they had reference to her), but were addressed to

her mother, a fragile and sickly-looking woman, who sat in a low chair by the window reading.

‘Why, Martha, your Lucy is grown quite a woman!’

‘She is tall enough, Miss Edith, that’s true,’ answered the person addressed, rising slowly from her seat, and dropping a curtsey as she spoke; ‘I’m almost afraid as she will outgrow her strength.’

‘And yet she looks strong and healthy,’ said Sister Edith, turning to the girl with a pleasant smile, which the object of her admiration did not seem, nevertheless, to take in good part. She disliked being spoken of in the third person, ‘as though she were a horse or a cow, instead of a human being,’ as she afterwards expressed it. Sister Edith was famous for her judicious behaviour in her dealings with the poor; but Lucy Lindon had a nature which suspected patronage in all relations with her superiors, and resented it. Mrs. Parkes, her mother, had married again, and in so doing had lost much of that maternal in-

fluence which would otherwise have been certainly directed to amend this disposition in her offspring.

‘Well, Lucy, and how do you like London?’ inquired Sister Edith, kindly.

‘Well, ma’am, one doesn’t see much of the bright side of it in Ford’s Alley, I reckon; but from what I *have* seen, I prefer it to Durnton.’

‘Indeed! then I differ from you,’ said the other, with a half sigh. ‘When I was your age I thought Durnton the pleasantest spot in the world.’

‘I find it dull,’ said Lucy, quietly.

‘But you have plenty to do, I should think, in helping your mother; and the work that should be most welcome is what we do for those who are dear to us. Young girls should never feel dull.’

‘Well, you see, Miss Edith,’ interposed the elder woman, ‘there is really not much to be done at home, and what Lucy does is done quickly, and I am bound to say done well. And when the work’s over, she’s no great reader, though like her aunt, she has a taste for music.’

'That is a harmless taste enough; you don't play the flute, I suppose; like your aunt Susan? It is a very unusual gift for one of your sex.'

'No, ma'am, I don't play the flute,' said Lucy, whose eyes were still fixed upon the instrument in question. 'I don't play anything, and for a very good reason, I have got nothing to play upon.'

'Lor, Lucy,' exclaimed her mother, 'how can you talk like that! she's every bit as much a musician in her way as Susan. If it wasn't Sunday, you should hear her sing, Miss Edith.'

Lucy's beautiful face was overspread by an expression of serene contempt, that seemed to include at once her singing talents and the utterer of these encomiums herself.

'Mother knows nothing about music,' said she, 'and I very little. I can just amuse myself, that's all.'

'That is not your aunt Susan's view,' returned Mrs. Parkes; 'she says that you have great gifts if you had but a teacher.'

Edith stood looking from one to the other of the speakers, with a grave face. Perhaps one of them at least expected that she would pursue this subject to some practical result, but if so she was doomed to disappointment.

‘Your foster-son, Master Richard, is up in London, Martha ; when you next see him at the Tower you will hardly know him ; during his last half at school he has become quite a young man.’

‘Nay—but we *have* seen him, Miss Edith ; he called here only yesterday, and a very kind and thoughtful thing it was of him to come and see me.’

‘Indeed! He never told me he had been here, nor was I aware that he knew you were in London.’

‘Well, I suppose my husband told him. You see, since he has been made keeper, Master Richard sees a good deal of him in the sporting way ; and he was writing to him about the prospect of birds and that, and I suppose, put in that Lucy and I were come to town for a few days. I must say

for Master Richard, that he has no pride about him, and never forgets his old foster-mother.'

'Richard has a kind heart,' said Sister Edith, with a smile that contrasted strangely with a certain air of anxiety that had suddenly come over her. 'I suppose he is a general favourite at Durnton?'

'That he is, ma'am; though, to be sure, his high spirits sometimes lead him a little astray.'

'Is he much with your husband?' inquired Sister Edith with sudden sharpness.

'Oh, not to *signify*, ma'am.' She laid a marked stress upon that word. 'They go a shooting together in the season, but that's wholesome work. Of course George ain't no saint, but he's been going straight this long time, and, if it were otherwise, I don't see as Master Richard could larn any harm of him. George likes him too well for that, as, indeed, he has cause; 'it was through Master Richard that he got his place under the squire, and then the dear

lad is so open-handed with his bacca and things. By-the-bye, Miss Edith,' continued Mrs. Parkes, changing her feeble and somewhat apologetic tone for one of unwonted decision, 'I have got something on my mind with regard to Master Richard. When he came here the other day, he left a present behind him; and I think it right to tell you what it was; for if you have any objection to Lucy's keeping it—bring it here, girl, and let me show it to Miss Edith.'

'I can show it myself, mother,' said Lucy, producing from her bosom a locket of gold, heart-shaped, and of the size of a filbert, which was hung round her neck by a silk riband. She did not take off the riband, but held out the locket in a manner that meant very clearly, 'You may look as much as you please, but the thing is mine, and I mean to keep it.'

Sister Edith, however, did not seem to notice this, and cast on the object in question a glance of calm indifference.

'Richard is always lavish,' she said,

'but if he wishes to spend his pocket-money in such a foolish fashion, I cannot help it.'

'Well, I did not mean the value of the gift, Miss Edith,' said the elder woman, 'though indeed it must have cost a pretty penny. I thought, perhaps, you might object to Lucy's wearing it?'

'I object, Mrs. Parkes?' and for the first time there was an air of hauteur in Sister Edith's voice; 'nay, she is your daughter, not mine. I think, indeed, that it is an unsuitable ornament for a person in her position to wear, and a very silly gift for Richard to choose for the child; but I don't see how she could well have done otherwise than accept it.'

Mrs. Parkes uttered a sigh of relief. Lucy put back the locket in her bosom, with the air of one who has half drawn his sword and replaces it in his scabbard, since there is no occasion for its use, but who would have been quite as willing to have settled the matter by cold steel.

'And how long are you going to stay

in London, Martha?' inquired Sister Edith.

'Well, ma'am, I think Tuesday'—Lucy drew herself up quickly, like a swan who has been stooping for a draught of water, and is disturbed by some strange sound—'or Wednesday at farthest, will see us back again at Durnton.'

'You will remember me to all old friends, Martha: I am glad to have seen you, and your daughter too.' She shook hands with both of them in her grave fashion; and descended to the room below, where she found Susan alone, clearing away the remainder of the feast—which comprised one huge bone, and much orange peel.

'I hope, Miss Edith, Martha told you about that locket,' said the dwarf, directly the other made her appearance.

'Oh yes, she told me.'

'I am glad of that, for it comes better from her mouth than mine. In my opinion, as I told Martha, the girl ought never to have been permitted to accept it.'

'Perhaps it was better not to make a

fuss about it, Susan, though it was indeed a most ill-advised and injudicious gift. Enough to turn the child's head if she had been a little older.'

A reply rose to the other's lips, but got no farther. She saw by Sister Edith's face that that lady understood the matter better than she chose to allow.

'Has Lucy really a talent for music, Susan ?'

'She has an excellent ear for it ; and though I don't pretend to be a judge of singing, she seems to me to have a very sweet voice.'

'Then if that was cultivated, she might turn out to be a good singer ?'

'Why, yes, miss ; I think there is no doubt of that.'

Sister Edith nodded, smiled pleasantly, and took her leave.

Meanwhile, there had been a little talk upstairs.

'Well, Lucy, I am glad that you may keep your locket, though I don't think Miss Edith was best pleased.'

'I am sorry for that, mother,' answered the girl, indifferently; 'but I should have kept it in any case, since it was given me for my own.'

She had taken it out once more, and was regarding it with an air of tenderness that suited ill with her haughty tone.

'It was very lucky, however, Lucy, that Miss Edith didn't ask to see the inside of it. Shut it up and put it away. I hear your aunt's step coming upstairs.'

If Sister Edith had opened the locket, she would have seen something more familiar than welcome—namely, the face of her nephew Richard, which he had had photographed at Eton for the very purpose of being fitted into that golden heart.



CHAPTER V.

CONFESSIONS.

It is difficult to fathom the mind of a man—not in a general way because of its profundity—but by reason of the many streams and eddies which divert the plumb line, and prevent its going straight to the bottom. A straw may show which way the wind blows the straw, but not which way the wind blows. And what is true of a man's mind is true in a less degree of the mind of a boy. We are quite sure in the latter case (as is also only too likely in the former) that Self forms the chief ingredient; but on the other hand, having forgotten our own boyhood, with its disproportionate hopes and fears, and finite plea-

tures, we are at fault for the springs of action. But in the case of the adolescent, or hobbledehoy, as he is contemptuously termed by his elders, it is scarcely necessary to use the dredging machine. We may take it for granted that his mind is more or less fixed upon the fair sex.

It was early days, some will think, for Master Richard Talbot to have given his photograph in a heart-shaped locket to the object of his affections, but then youth at Eton is precocious. These two—he and ‘the beloved object’—had not been at school together, like the youthful Scotch lovers, and ‘cleeked together hame’ afterwards, but they had learned ‘one lesson from the same book’—to love one another. From childhood upwards, Lucy had been his playmate in the summer woods about Durnton Regis, and ‘pu’ed the gowans fine’ to pour into each other’s laps; they had sought in company along the desolate shores of the Dorn for the marsh flower and the feathery rush; they had sat hand in hand for hours and watched the northern

ocean beat against the sea wall, and its awful diapason had been music to them. What did it matter, thought the neighbours, if the heir of the Tower and the child of his foster-mother found their chief pleasure in each other's society? Lucy's stepfather, George Parkes, bore, it is true, a very indifferent character, but even if he did teach the lad to snare a hare, or kill a pheasant on its perch without the aid of a gun, they were his father's hares and pheasants, and would be his own one day. There was no flaw to speak of in this reasoning, only the good folks who took this philosophic view of the matter overlooked the lapse of time, which brings about other changes than decay and death. Mr. Talbot the elder, whose business it was, as they justly said, to look after the lad, did not much concern himself with sublunary matters, but kept his thoughts fixed on higher things; whereas Mr. George Parkes, whose business it was to look after the girl, saw nothing objectionable in the intimacy between the two young people, and in fact

had done his best, especially of late, to encourage it.

Lucy's mother was a well-meaning but weak woman, rather afraid of her daughter (who, in addition to an independent fortune of two hundred pounds to come to her when of age, had a very decided temper of her own), and very much afraid of her husband, whose arguments, powerful in themselves, it was whispered were sometimes backed by the application of a broom-handle or other handy weapon of persuasion. The course of Master Richard's true love had therefore hitherto run smoothly enough, as regarded the young lady's family ; but he had now received intimation of opposition on the part of his own, and from an unexpected quarter. It seemed to him a most abnormal as well as unjustifiable proceeding that 'Sister Edith,' dead as she professed to be to earthly vanities, should meddle with any affair of the heart ; yet this she had done in his case, and with considerable vigour.

On her return from the 'children's dinner-

table' on that Sunday afternoon, she had had a long private interview with her nephew in which she had exhibited quite unlooked-for views of practical life and conduct. He had done his best to 'block' everything she said, as he afterwards expressed it, for he knew that scoring was out of the question, but he was nevertheless bowled out.

'I have found out how you spent your money, sir, since you came to London,' were her first words.

Dick's face was a picture. For a moment he looked a little anxious, like some gentleman of shady habits at a police court, who has not yet heard the particular 'charge' upon which he has been apprehended; but almost immediately he began to laugh outright.

'You must be very clever, Aunt Edie, for upon my life I can't tell you how it has gone, myself.'

'You bought a gold locket with it for Lucy Parkes.'

Thereupon was at once disproved the

libellous assertion that no Eton boy in the fifth form can blush : for into Dick's olive face came a very decided tinge of colour.

‘ I did buy her a locket, but it was not with that money,’ replied he with unwonted doggedness. It was a very foolish reply, and one which would have only occurred to a very young offender. Indeed, had he been really the gentleman in trouble, of whom we have hypothetically spoken, he would have previously been put upon his guard by the law itself, and solemnly warned not to commit himself by any such impulsive statement. Poor Dick thought he had found a flaw in the indictment instead of laying himself open to a new and equally serious charge.

‘ Then where did you get the first money ? Did your father entrust you with any other sums than the head-master's fee, and which you similarly misappropriated ?’

‘ It was my own money : I raised it at the pawnbroker's on my watch ’—and Dick dangled his albert guard with nothing at the end of it to corroborate his assertion.

It was very lucky for him that Sister Edith, through her relations with her poor clients, was familiar with the pawnbroking system, and was therefore not so shocked at this avowal as other persons in her position would have been: Lady Earnshaw, for example, would have been horrified by such a revelation of depravity. Nevertheless, her manner was very grave and almost stern, as she replied, 'Oh, you pawned the watch that your grandmother gave you on your birthday. Suppose she was to ask to see it?'

'I should not tell her a lie, Aunt Edie.'

Here the accused made the first point in his own favour, and I am afraid 'the court was with him' from that moment, notwithstanding its implacable demeanour. Sister Edith admired the boy's positiveness, so different from the evasions and falsehoods she was accustomed to meet with in the youth of another class; and she did not perhaps take into account how generous treatment and a position of social superiority lead to truth (except in the

basest characters), as naturally as poverty and dependence to lying.

‘I suppose not, Richard ; yet the truth would distress her almost as much as a lie. That watch must be redeemed at once.’

‘I’m awfully sorry, Aunt Edie, but I tore up the ticket.’

‘Tore up the ticket ? what for ?’

‘Well, I’ll tell you, and then you’ll see that it’s not worth while to get the watch out. I was running downstairs at “my tutor’s,” and it somehow jumped out of my pocket and fell on the pavement of the hall. It never went again, except for a moment or two, unless it was laid upon its back ; and so I “popped” it for three pounds. You may wonder how I got so much money on it ; but the fact is, the man had had it once or twice before the accident—and not knowing it had now only a “horizontal movement” (as I’ve heard him call it), he advanced the same sum as usual, and you see I knew it would not be worth while to redeem it at the old price, and so I tore up the ticket.’

'Richard Talbot, you are a very wicked boy.'

'I know I'm a bad lot, Aunt Edie. I was born so; father says we are all born so, till something happens, I don't quite know what it is. I only know it hasn't happened to me.'

This was another point in Dick's favour. The terrible manner (as his aunt thought it) of his bringing up, the heretical notions that had been instilled into him from his childhood, were an excuse for almost anything that was amiss in the lad. There was nevertheless a certain scorn in her tone (very rarely found there) as she replied, 'If I were you, Richard, I would not speak of religion of any kind when confessing to have cheated a tradesman.'

Then once more this incorrigible boy burst into laughter, which it must be confessed was of a genuine sort, not defiant nor cynical, but a wholesome fit of merriment produced by the very source of fun—the sense of incongruity.

'My dear Aunt Edie, if you only knew

old Pledge ! The downiest, wiliest, thievingest old Jew jeweller out of Newgate. He charged me for that very locket (as I have since found out, for another fellow bought one exactly like it) nearly twice its value, because he knew I had the money in my pocket, since he had just advanced it on the watch. Once—just *once*—out of a dozen transactions I have had with him, I have got this little rise out of him—and you talk of cheating. Cheating Mr. Josiah Pledge ! You might just as well attempt to cheat the—why, dear me, anybody,’ concluded Master Richard, in some confusion.

‘Because a person such as you describe has behaved ill to you, Richard, is no reason why you should take an underhand advantage of him.’

‘Advantage ! I wish I could think that had happened ; I have no doubt that even now he has made a good bargain, though not so good as he imagined. I am sure he has, by the way in which he grinned at me the next time—that is, I mean, the next

time I met him, and when, of course, he had found it out.'

'So young Eton gentlemen frequent pawnbrokers' shops as other boys at other schools go to the pastry-cook's?'

'No, Aunt Edie; but some of them have a taste for jewellery, or like to buy it for their sisters.' Dick had just avoided the pit-fall 'sweethearts,' and a quick turn of the tongue landed him on this firm domestic ground. 'I dare say there are very few fellows who know he *is* a pawnbroker; but somehow, I found it out; and when one wants a little money—and I'm always wanting it, Aunt Edie—Josiah's shop is a great convenience.'

'I wish to hear nothing more, Richard, of such disgraceful doings,' said Sister Edith, 'I will send to Windsor to-morrow and get back the watch. If it can't be made to go, you shall have another like it.'

'Oh! Aunt Edie!'

She held up her hand for silence. 'I don't want your thanks, Richard. If you are really grateful, show it by amendment.'

About one thing I have made up my mind. You will return home to-morrow—London is not a proper place for a boy who has no one to look after him, and who has no good principles to keep him straight. There shall be no gambling, nor coming home at daylight, while you are (ostensibly) under your grandmother's care.'

'Let me stay till Wednesday, Aunt Edie,' pleaded Dick, with downcast eyes.

'Why?' He felt, though he did not meet her gaze, that Aunt Edie was looking him through and through.

'Well, I had promised to meet a friend, who is going to the Crystal Palace on Tuesday, with a relative.'

'Your friend must be content with his relative.'

'Well, but suppose I don't choose to go,' said the lad. 'You've been very good to me, I don't deny; but I am not a child, Aunt Edie.'

'No, for you lack the innocence of childhood. If you refuse to go I will tell your grandmother what time you came home this morning.'

‘Well, that is mean ; for you gave me to understand you wouldn’t. That’s what the governor would call Jesuitical.’

The colour rushed into Sister Edith’s face, as though he had struck it with his hand.

‘No, I didn’t mean that, Aunt Edie,’ exclaimed he, eagerly; ‘of course, you could tell her about the watch, and that hole would be quite deep enough for me. Let there be “*Pax*” between us ; that’s what we say at Eton, when we make up a quarrel. I’ll go home to-morrow, if you wish it ; only how are you going to explain it to the governor ?’

‘I will get your grandmother to do that, and, if possible, without getting you into trouble ; but, of course, I must tell her *something*.’

‘Don’t say anything about old Pledge—and the—the locket,’ said Dick, sheepishly.

‘Of course not. There would however have been no harm in giving a present to your foster-mother’s child, if you had bought it with your own pocket-money,

though the gift you chose was ridiculously unsuitable. Is this Mr. Pledge a watchmaker ?'

'Yes ; at least, I suppose so ; he sells watches.'

'Well, then, if Lady Earnshaw asks where your watch is, you can tell her with truth that it is at the watchmaker's.'

'By Jove, Aunt Edie, what a oner* you are to get a fellow out of a scrape !'

'I wish I could get you out of the faults that lead to the scrapes.'

So the interview had ended. Aunt Edie proved as good as her word, and contrived to explain her nephew's sudden departure to Lady Earnshaw (he called it 'squaring his grandmother') without getting him into trouble with her. She even purchased for him a silver watch, as a temporary substitute for that in the custody of Mr. Pledge, and also sent a cheque to the head-master for the money that her young relative had omitted, by mistake, to leave behind him.

* A comparative degree of comparison, pronounced Wonner.

But there was one item in the arrangements which Master Richard resented extremely. He had a companion on his way to the Eastern Counties railway station in the person of the Rev. Gerald Vane, who, happening to look in, in Gresham Street, on Monday morning on his way to that very part of the town, was offered by Sister Edith a seat in his cab. Nothing could be more natural than such a proceeding, only Dick had a shrewd suspicion that the whole plan had been designed to see him safe into the train, and on his way home. He had no very great admiration for ecclesiastics generally—in the circles at Eton in which Dick moved they were called ‘devil-dodgers’—and Mr. Vane was an object of his especial dislike. He didn’t lay everything to heart that his father said, but when it was of a character that suited with his own ideas it had its weight, and his father had said some very severe things of ‘Father Vane.’ One of them was that he was not so solicitous to be Aunt Edie’s ‘father’ as her ‘husband,’ and that not so

much in view of her spiritual gifts as of her temporal possessions. Not that Aunt Edie was rich ; her father had not wronged his son, as he had at one time apprehended, by making her his heir ; but he had left her an income which, in the eyes of an ascetic ecclesiastic accustomed to the root and the spring—but not, perhaps, preferring them—might seem considerable. Mr. Vane was younger than Aunt Edie—a circumstance which surely should have disarmed distrust : on the contrary, with some cynical persons it increased it. He was also understood to be vowed to celibacy, but even that did not absolve him from this injurious suspicion ; it greatly confirmed it.

Mr. Gerald Vane was a well-looking young man, and moreover looked a gentleman. But for a slight squint, which almost always lends a sinister expression to the face, he would have been a very handsome man. It was impossible—in his clothes at least—to mistake him for anything but what he was—an English clergyman of the highest and driest school. He had never

worn even a black cravat since the day of his ordination ; nothing but the stiffest white ones—nor was a vestige of shirt-collar to be seen above it. His coat, on the other hand, was all collar, and stood up about him like the ruff of a pigeon. How he got into his waistcoat was a secret known only to himself, his tailor, and (possibly) his confessor. It had no visible fastening of any kind, and looked like a bishop's silk apron worn a story higher. His hair was short and straight, and very smooth. His voice was as gentle as a woman's, and much more persuasive with the sex than any female voice. He was not, however, as we have hinted, a favourite with Lady Earnshaw, who held out to him two jewelled fingers by way of greeting. This was her least favourable form of salutation ; her ordinary acquaintances got three fingers. When Richard bade her good-bye, she gave him her whole hand (with a sovereign in it), and kissed his cheek. She liked handsome lads, and not the less if they were a trifle reckless ; she

did not, as a rule, like clergymen, especially that section of them who attribute potency and importance to their own calling. I am afraid her venerable face wore a sly smile, that was not altogether good-natured, as she saw the two gentlemen depart in company. Sister Edith did not observe this, or she would scarcely have remarked when they had gone, 'It is a great relief to me that dear Dick has left us in safe hands ; I trust Mr. Vane' (she never called him 'Father Vane' before her aunt) 'will have the opportunity of saying a word in season before he parts from him.'

'I think he had much better not.'

'Oh, aunt, why not ?'

'Well, I mean for his own sake. He's a very nice-spoken young man, no doubt ; but Dick will eat him.'

Although the prophecy was not literally accomplished, it must be confessed that Mr. Vane found Master Richard by no means conciliatory, and even slightly rude. It was quite in vain, that in a praiseworthy attempt to imitate the apostolic example of

being all things to all men, the good man tried to affect the manners of a man of the world to win the ear of his companion, and then to instil in it the words of wisdom. So far as that little device was concerned, he might just as well have put on his bands, taken out a sermon, and preached it at him. Dick had an instinctive sense of any design to improve his mind, no matter under what form it offered itself, and resented it extremely.

‘Jolly place, London,’ observed the curate cheerfully, as they rolled through the not very ‘jolly’ streets that formed their route to Shoreditch; ‘you have had a pleasant time of it, no doubt.’

‘Oh, pretty well.’

‘Been to the theatre, and so on, I suppose?’

‘No, only to the so-on—the music-hall.’

This was rather startling; but perhaps, thought the curate, this disagreeable young person, who had been brought up almost as a dissenter, might be referring to Exeter Hall, where he believed, between the

eccentric outbreaks of heterodoxy, there were lucid intervals of music.

‘Music is a great interpreter of the emotions,’ observed Mr. Vane thoughtfully, ‘and an innocent as well as wholesome recreation. You have choral service at Eton, have you not?’

‘I believe you,’ said Master Richard, and he laughed, as if at the recollection of some stroke of humour.

‘You find nothing to laugh at in *that*, I hope,’ observed the curate with severity; for there are some things (though they are different ones) that none of us can stand.

‘Quite the contrary,’ answered Dick coolly, ‘I was thinking of the fun one gets out of the choristers. You give them nuts, you know—sixpennyworth among the lot will do it—and then they can’t sing a note.’

‘And do you think that quite fair?’ inquired the curate. He spoke very quietly, but he would have liked nothing better at that moment than to have seen his young companion kneeling at the block—not, in deed, at Tower Hill, but in that chamber

at Eton College which is dedicated to flagellation.

‘Fair! Well, the choristers like it, and *we* like it. What would you have?’

‘And the congregation?’

‘Well, we *are* the congregation; so, you see, everybody’s pleased.’

‘I don’t think Sister Edith would be pleased if she heard of such proceedings.’

‘That is a pity,’ said Dick. ‘But I have not the pleasure of your sister Edith’s acquaintance.’

The curate’s smooth, pale face became scarlet.

‘I was speaking of your aunt, sir.’

‘Oh, indeed! she is generally called Miss Talbot, except by her near relatives.’

It would have been difficult and evidently have given occasion for injurious remarks, had the curate attempted to explain to this young desperado the theory of spiritual relationship as taught by the Church; and, moreover, he was beginning to feel very uncomfortable from the fumes of an immense cigar which Master Richard

had lit up. It would be improper to say that the good ecclesiastic felt angry, but he would have liked to have handed his companion over to the secular arm for summary chastisement. However, he did make one more effort at conciliation, as they passed by the refreshment-room at the station.

‘Will you have a bun, Richard?’ he said.

‘A bun!’ cried Dick, while all the outraged dignity of the Etonian flashed from his eyes. ‘I may have been rude, sir, but I am not a bear.’

He threw himself into the train, and plunged in the pages of the *Sporting Life*, while the curate watched by the carriage-door, like a good angel baffled. He had performed his mission so far as seeing the young gentleman safely ‘off,’ but he could scarcely be said to have done much towards his moral development. He sighed as he left the station, ‘If I were to tell his aunt the naked truth, I should say, “that boy will be hung.”’

The curate, on the other hand, passed from Richard's mind as soon as he lost sight of him, and was replaced by even a more attractive object. A tall and shapely figure, with hazel eyes and a profusion of nutbrown hair : he could not meet her at the Crystal Palace, to which she had promised to persuade her mother to take her on the ensuing day, but on Wednesday at latest she would be down at Durnton. The autumn holidays were not in general the pleasantest, since they afforded neither shooting nor hunting ; though on this occasion, as it happened, he had a certain invitation in prospect, which promised amusement, since it included the society of his friend Greene ; but he had never looked forward to a vacation with such pleasure. What he felt to be one of the chief charms of this first love was that it was secret. Lucy alone shared with him the knowledge of its sweet existence. Nobody guessed, nobody dreamt of it, but themselves. His foster-mother, indeed, was aware that they loved one another, but

only as they had always done ; and even Aunt Edie knew that he did not forget his playmate. But no one had the least suspicion of the real state of the case, or would think of putting any obstacle in the way of his happiness. He had probably—notwithstanding some very serious surroundings—never entertained a really serious thought in his life, prior to that which now possessed his mind, namely, to make Lucy Lindon his lawful wife at the earliest opportunity.



CHAPTER VI.

THE MASTER OF THE TOWER.

THERE is much talk of the different degrees of fortune among mankind : the heaped-up wealth and idleness of the few are compared (and with effect indeed, for it is terrible) with the constant toil that is not even yet sufficient to keep poverty from the door of the many. But sharp as is the contrast, it is not greater than that which exists between the inward thoughts of men, often of the same condition and even lineage. Between my lady in the boudoir and the wench that she has scarcely set eyes on in her kitchen, there is, it is true, a great gulf fixed ; but it is neither so great nor so impassable as that perchance which

separates my lady's mind from that of her lord, or, it may be, from that of the child of her bosom.

On paramount occasions—when standing in the presence of our dead, for example—the common tie of humanity may assert itself to the very depths of us ; but in ordinary life it often happens that, even with those nearest to us, we have nothing save goodwill, and sometimes, alas ! not even that, in common. It was not to be expected that Richard Talbot, fresh from school, and in the dawn of manhood, with his mind, as we have seen, fixed (although so naturally) upon a *mésalliance* that was in the world's view impossible, could have much within him in unison with a man of fifty, a recluse, and, as was whispered, a fanatic and a visionary, albeit he was his own father ; and the gulf between them was even wider than it seemed. That it was a natural one, induced by the idiosyncrasy of each, and not a breach caused by quarrel and which could be healed by reconciliation, only made it the more insuper-

able. And yet there was a bond on both sides ; on the one indeed but the instinctive filial affection which without sympathy is little more than a mechanical force ; on the other a strong parental love ; only unfortunately there was small demonstration of this last. Dick could have remembered a time, had he taxed his volatile mind to do so, when his father welcomed him in the morning and dismissed him at night with a warm, nay, even a passionate embrace ; when he would emerge from his own sombre thoughts, though not without a visible effort, to enter into his recreations, and when his childish prattle always met with an attentive ear. It seemed that this reserved and melancholy man, having so little interest in the affairs of this world, and no other object but his son to love, then lavished on him all his pent-up affections. But a time came—Dick knew not why, nor even precisely at what date—when the current of his father's love had ceased to flow. It was visible still, but instead of the warm glow and motion it

had once possessed, it was ice-bound. He listened with attention to all that was suggested for the lad's advantage, and supplied without stint everything that was required for his pleasure or comfort, but from the period in question his personal solicitude about him had sensibly diminished, and his affection was no longer demonstrated by endearments. Under any circumstances this coldness would have worked ill in a boy of Dick's ardent disposition, but the change from hot to cold was fatal. So soon as the child perceived it, he withdrew his confidence from his parent and reposed it, when he gave it at all, in far less fitting hands. It could not be said that he was afraid of his father, for even now, when he was returning to the paternal roof before the appointed time, certainly not by reason of his good behaviour, he felt but little apprehension concerning his reception: but he experienced no pleasure in the thought of home.

If Francis Talbot yearned to see his only son after three months of absence,

none could tell it by his speech or look. He was the same grim, saturnine man this day—though, indeed, he did not look for Dick's return till the ensuing Wednesday—as he had been any time during the last twelve years ; and, indeed, even more so, for an unexpected guest, one M. de Blaise, a young French gentleman, had just arrived at the Tower, whose presence was by no means welcome to him—for reasons.

He has sent this youngster out to 'amuse himself'—which he finds very difficult—in the park and garden, and is sitting alone in his accustomed room, the library. Even on a summer day this apartment is a gloomy one, and ill-adapted for its purpose. The roof is low, its windows are small and narrow, and seem chiefly intended to demonstrate the excessive thickness of its walls ; the shelves are loaded with dingy tomes of ancient date, and in some cases only with dust ; for much of the literary treasures of Talbot Tower consisted of works of Catholic theology, and all these have been committed to the flames by its

present proprietor. Bad as unbelief is in his eyes, it is not so bad as Popery. As to novels and stage-plays, he has never looked in any such book for these fifteen years, and Dick despises them as heartily as himself, though not on the same grounds. He has no taste for literature of any sort, but least of all for that description of it which engrosses his father. As you see Francis Talbot now, with a ponderous tome of doctrine on his knees, and his thin, keen face bending over it in rapt attention, you would say, not 'here is a student,' but 'here is a fanatic.' He is reading the sentence pronounced against Servetus by the Council of Geneva, at the instance of Calvin: 'We now pronounce our final sentence, and condemn thee, Michael Servetus, to be fastened to a stake and burnt alive, along with thy books, printed as well as written by thy hand, until thy body be reduced to ashes.' 'Most just, most just,' he murmurs, then he turns the page to the account of the execution, and reads, 'But the wood being perfectly green,

though the people aided the executioner in heaping fagots upon him, a long half hour elapsed before he ceased to show signs of life and suffering.' 'What is that, what is that,' is the comment, 'to the eternal fire?' He rises, puts down the book, and begins to pace the room. 'He repented afterwards and excused himself'—(he is speaking of Calvin)—'and there he erred, since he was only doing the Lord's will. He cut him off from hindering the Word, and what was half an hour more or less to the immeasurable sum of torment prepared for him?' 'Who dares to say,' cried he, lifting his voice and addressing an imaginary adversary, 'that there is no Gehenna to me, to *me*, who have felt its flames these twelve years?'

His face, dark almost as a gipsy's, glowed with strange fire, his spare form rose above its ordinary height, and his eyes, keen as a hawk's, seemed to question the very heaven on which they rested. Suddenly his ear caught footsteps in the corridor without, and the cloud cleared a little from

his brow, as he exclaimed, 'This is kind of you, Rector.'

'Kind, sir? do not talk of kind,' said the new comer. 'My time, when not employed in my Master's service, is always at yours, Talbot.'

The speaker was a tall and 'singularly handsome man. He had a smooth forehead and speaking eyes of grey; his hair showed no trace of silver, though he was far advanced in middle life, and he wore it long and flowing. Francis Talbot and Giles Freeman were born in the same year, but the former looked older than his contemporary by at least a decade.

'I have sent for you on a painful occasion. Charles—young De Blaise has come.'

'Ah—he wants money, of course.'

'Yes. And he must have it. But I will not have him here. Suppose Richard should have been at home! His coming is most unjustifiable, and contrary to our compact.'

'Leave me to deal with him; I will put

that straight. His claim is made void by such a proceeding, to begin with.'

'No, no. There must be no threats. He shall have what he wants. But his presence is intolerable to me. He is so like—so like.'

The speaker sank down in a chair and buried his face in his hands.

'This is worse than weakness, Talbot. What is done cannot be undone; if, indeed, you are so guilty as you imagine; and I cannot but think there is much doubt of that.'

'Doubt?' echoed the other in melancholy scorn.

'Yes; in a spiritual sense. It has been held by great divines—especially by him whose works I see you have been reading, doubtless to edification—that deeds done in the flesh, before we become regenerate, are alien and of no account; that the new man is literally a new creature. It is said that every seven years the natural body is renewed, and has no parts remaining of that which first belonged to it; how much more, therefore, is it probable that the spirit,

starting afresh from a vital epoch, should cast off its dross ?'

Talbot groaned.

The other looked at him with searching eyes, and remained silent.

A young man sauntered by the window ; he had a cane in his hand, with which he idly struck off the heads of the roses that climbed above the terrace wall.

'That is he.'

'Aye,' said the Rector, slowly ; 'a comely lad enough. How old is he ?'

'Eighteen. He was the youngest. The other two are dead.'

'He has the allowances of his brothers, you said, and of his mother ?'

'Yes, it was so arranged.'

'And yet he wants more money. It is like pouring water on a sponge.'

'I know it ; what matters that ?'

'And he is a Papist ?'

'I suppose so.'

'Does that matter nothing ? You are perhaps swelling the money-bags of the Scarlet Woman herself, and you should

think twice before you allow any consideration, no matter how plausible it may appear to you, to contribute to an evil cause.'

'This is not a question of plausibility, Freeman ; it is mere right and justice.'

'Ah, that is one of the most ingenious of Satan's devices. With a man like you it is no use for him to suggest fraud or misconduct ; he says, " Give," " Be generous," or " Forgive," " Be reconciled," but his object is the same as though he counselled the darkest deeds. He would have you serve him all the same.'

'Then you really think one is justified in withholding what is due to a man, if the giving it would be harmful to religion ?'

'Can there be a doubt of it, my Christian friend. Supposing as your Richard grew up he were to be a dissipated liver (which Heaven forbid !), and you had agreed to allow him a large income, which he spent in riot, would you not be justified, in spite of your agreement, in putting him upon a less allowance for the good of his own soul ? The case we are considering is

much more serious. It is not one of morals only, but of religion. It does not affect one soul only, but many. Therefore I say if this young man's views, being what he is, are of a virulent type, it behoves you, all compacts notwithstanding, to render him as little harmful as possible. In place of increasing your largesse, check his allowance ; cut his claws.'

During the beginning of this speech, Mr. Talbot had appeared to listen with deep attention. He had put his case of conscience to the Rector, as though it had a strong personal interest for him ; but ere the other had finished, his sombre face wore a less earnest look, and was at last even illumined by a smile.

'Indeed, Rector, this young gentleman is innocent of the thought of spending any money he may get from me in the manner you apprehend. The Pope will never be a penny the richer by him. You shall judge of his character, however, for yourself. The more you monopolise his conversation the better I shall be pleased. A

tête-à-tête with the poor lad would have been intolerable to me.'

'Well, I will do my best. I have snatched brands from the burning before now that have appeared even less promising than this misguided young creature.'

'I do not see that you are called upon to enter into controversy with him,' observed the other, dryly. 'He has been brought up in the faith of his fathers—and remember, Freeman, it is a peculiar case.'

'I understand, and I respect your scruples. I shall drop a word in season ; nothing more.'

At that moment the strokes of the dinner-gong began to vibrate, and the two gentlemen passed through the corridor and into the hall, where they found De Blaise examining the great painted window, emblazoned with the arms of the Talbots.

'This is Charles of whom you have heard me speak, Mr. Freeman,' said the host, introducing them. 'And this, my lad, is our good Rector.'

The two guests looked at one another

with considerable interest; and each made the mental reflection that this was the first of the other's type that they had happened to meet with.

Mr. Freeman was a large, heavily-built man, of florid complexion, and with that patronising air which clergymen acquire who are 'greatly thought of' by their congregations. He had been a popular preacher in London before Mr. Talbot had presented him with the living of Durnton Regis, and he was not forgetful of his former eminence.

De Blaise was of a slight figure, rather undersized, though by no means insignificant-looking; his face was wan and a little weary in its expression, as is apt to be the case with gentlemen who have had their experience of what is popularly termed 'life' at an early age; but his black eyes were bright and lustrous.

He bowed politely as the Rector took his hand, but did not return its somewhat unctuous pressure.

'These are fine windows,' said he, in

good English. 'I have never seen the like of them except in cathedrals.'

'Where they had much better not be,' observed Mr. Freeman gravely; 'their tendency being too often idolatrous. These, on the contrary, are in their proper place. You may here read the record of a noble house from generation to generation; that is if you have the requisite heraldic knowledge.'

'Indeed. These bars and crosses signify something, then?'

'Certainly; on that pane is written, for example, that an heiress came into the family.'

'Mon Dieu! You surprise me. Then this bloody hand means murder?'

'Dinner waits, gentlemen,' exclaimed Mr. Talbot, in a hoarse, impatient tone; and he himself led the way into the dining-room.

'You are mistaken, young sir,' whispered the Rector. 'That symbol tells us that a baronetcy was conferred on one of our host's ancestors. It was lost in the Stuart troubles.'



CHAPTER VII.

AN INOPPORTUNE ARRIVAL.

THE dining-room at Talbot Tower was one of the things to be seen in Suffolk, but it was scarcely adapted for purposes of conviviality. Its ceiling was a marvel of oak carving, which you needed, however, a ladder to examine critically. Its knots and bosses had an air of insecurity for those who sat beneath them; stern Talbots, painted in panel and of life size, frowned down on you from the walls; and in six corners of the room stood men in armour, with sconces in their hands, which had not an encouraging effect upon the conversationalist. This company of three persons, sitting at one end of the gigantic dining-table,

might have almost given to an imaginative mind the notion of survivorship—that all the rest of the party who should have had their places there had been removed by death. And the host himself looked not unlikely to follow them.

His face, always sombre and cheerless, had from some cause become suddenly drawn and pallid, like that of a man whose hours are numbered ; for some minutes he even kept an unbroken silence, and though he made a pretence of opening his lips to admit food, nothing actually passed them. His appearance and behaviour were sufficient in short to cast a gloom over any table, and sad and severe the banquet would have been but for the vivacity of his guests. That of the rector, though it was no less effectual on that account, was forced. He had seen Mr. Talbot once if not twice before in almost as melancholy a condition as the present ; he was accustomed to his retired and morbid ways, and it was his mission at the Tower to conceal and gloss them over to others as much as possible.

De Blaise, on the other hand, was of a nature too egotistic to be depressed by another's gloom, even though it were that of his host, so long as he could find a listener to his ready tongue. He had been left to himself for the last two hours (which he had found dull companionship), and that unaccustomed abstinence from talk had made him more garrulous even than usual.

It required no finesse on the part of his companion to extract from him his position and prospects ; he had just been made a lieutenant in the army, and was about to proceed with his regiment to Algeria, where things were cheap ; only, unhappily, he had been lately quartered in Paris, where things were dear. It was to purchase his outfit and to pay his debts (to say truth, it was to escape arrest because of them) that he had had to apply to his dear friend and patron for a little money.

This latter piece of information was given in a low tone, though as the rector sat between him and Mr. Talbot, and the latter was obviously deaf and blind to all

that was taking place about him, the precaution was hardly necessary.

'Yet he gives you a very handsome allowance?' observed Mr. Freeman, tentatively.

'That is true; but then one is accustomed to live handsomely. Ten thousand francs a year are a good many francs you may say; but what is a franc?'

'In England we think four hundred pounds a year a very tolerable addition to a young officer's income, Mr. de Blaise.'

'And so it is when he has an income. Mr. Talbot is liberal in his bounty. However, I have it in his own handwriting that if I or mine were in need, we were not to scruple to apply to him for even further help. They are all gone now, except me; I ask, as it were, therefore with four voices.'

'You refer to your mother and your brothers?'

'Yes. They have gone to heaven, where they doubtless pray for our good friend here; who deserves all their intercession.'

This was a statement which the rector would have felt called upon under ordinary circumstances to contest to the uttermost, but he had a purpose in view which, if less pious, was, for the moment, more pressing than theological dogma. He wished to discover how much the young man knew of the bond that united him to his host.

‘Mr. Talbot must have a very great regard for you, Mr. de Blaise.’

‘Not that I am aware of,’ returned the other, naïvely. ‘Indeed, I have never seen him but once before. It is out of reverence and regard for my dear father (Heaven rest his soul!) that he is thus generous.’

‘That is so, is it?’ The rector filled his wine-glass and looked at it critically against the light.

‘They were brothers-in-arms, and devoted to one another.’

‘In the Crimea, I conclude?’ put in the other with gravity, though he was well aware that his host had never held a commission.’

‘Yes; and what is very curious, notwithstanding all Mr. Talbot’s goodness, my mother could never overcome a certain jealousy of him upon that very account. You will think it strange, but I positively have never heard her mention his name.’

‘You must have heard others, however, speak of him.’

‘Never; except the lawyer through whom his money came. We were at Rouen—I was a mere child at the time—when my father died in Paris; and what would have struck me as singular but for my subsequent knowledge of my mother’s coldness towards him, Mr. Talbot never came to see us till long afterwards—indeed, till after her death. He has shown himself a true friend in other ways, but even now he has forbidden me to speak of the past, so grievously does the remembrance of my father affect him.’

‘I know it. There is no one whose death he lamented so much. I am sure you would never wish to broach the subject to him.’

‘I have given my promise to that effect, sir,’ said the young man stiffly; ‘and I hope I am a man of honour.’ Perhaps in his momentary indignation he raised his voice, or perhaps the sonorous sound of the last word drew Mr. Talbot’s attention to his guests for the first time.

‘Honour,’ echoed he in contemptuous tones; ‘I trust, young man, your actions are guided by higher motives than such an *ignis fatuus*. I knew one who had as high a reputation for that virtue as any man, and yet he was a seducer and an assassin.’

De Blaise was about to speak, but the rector’s hand pressed heavily on his arm, and he held his peace.

‘What is the news in Paris, Charles?’ asked Mr. Talbot presently, with an air of one who dismisses with effort an unpleasant subject.

‘Oh, the Bertrand will case, sir, is still the general topic.’

‘A will case,’ answered his host, with an unexpected touch of interest; ‘let us hear it.’

‘Well, Marshal Bertrand cut his throat, you know, and, according to our law in France, was buried in his clothes. There being no will, his property went to the next heir, whereas it was known that he had intended to leave it to his friend, Viscount Piers. He had certainly executed some deed to that effect, and was supposed to have carried it about his person. It is there still, no doubt, only it is considered an impiety with us to search or take anything out of the pockets of what you English call a *felo de se*.’

‘What superstition!’ exclaimed the rector.

‘Yes; but the priests in this instance are against the superstition. Bertrand’s heir is a Protestant, while the Viscount is an Ultramontanist, and if he got the money would as likely as not give half of it to the Pope. It is most amusing to see how all the Liberals are therefore in favour of respecting the ecclesiastical law.’

‘The law is always deserving of respect,’ observed Mr. Freeman sententiously, ‘but

more especially when it goes hand in hand with the public interest.'

'Then you think no search should be made lest the Pope should profit by it?' said the young fellow, laughing. 'That is the very argument of the heir—but then *he* hopes to profit by it.'

'Young man, do not be uncharitable,' put in Mr. Talbot, gravely. 'These questions of conscience are not to be settled in a moment.'

De Blaise gave a shrug of his shoulders. 'Well, for my part, I am not a moralist. But it is my humble experience that if once one begins to think "Is this thing right or the other," I end by deciding on the course that best suits with my own interests.'

'There is a way of escape from all temptations,' observed the rector, filling himself a glass of his favourite Madeira (which was poison to him), 'but one must ask for counsel in the right quarter.'

'Ah, you would have one consult the priest,' laughed De Blaise; 'there is nothing like leather.'

‘The priest ! Heaven forbid. My dear young sir——’ At this moment a peal from the front-door bell, which had been certainly pulled with a will, rang through the house. ‘Great Heaven, if it should be Richard !’ exclaimed the host, starting to his feet, and looking apprehensively towards Mr. Freeman.

‘It is not likely, my dear Mr. Talbot ; he was not to come till to-morrow at earliest, though I must own it was like Richard’s ring.’

‘It *is* he ; I hear his voice,’ groaned Mr. Talbot, then added in a hurried whisper, ‘take Charles away ; they must never meet.’

He spoke too late, however, for, ere he had finished, the door opened and admitted Master Dick himself.

‘How are you, father ? How d’ye do, Mr. Freeman ?—I did not know that you had company.’

‘Nay ; Mr. de Blaise is not company,’ interposed the rector, blandly ; for Mr. Talbot had only muttered a few unintel-

ligible words of welcome. 'His family has been known to your good father for many a year, and it is only right you two should be good friends.'

The young gentlemen shook hands, but by no means with cordiality. Dick felt that the inconvenience of his arrival had been increased by the presence of this stranger, for how could he explain before him that he had been sent home earlier than had been agreed upon because he had proved too much for his grandmother to 'manage;' moreover, he more than suspected that this young fellow was the very one of whom he had heard certain vague rumours as having a claim upon his father, which was certainly not one to be acknowledged by his lawful son. Mr. Talbot had never so much as mentioned to him De Blaise's name, yet here the man was sitting, as though the house belonged to him, while his host was manifestly distressed and ill at ease.

De Blaise on his part was quick to perceive these indications of disfavour, and

resented them by at once affecting that air of patronage towards Dick which to a stripling is so offensive in one only a year or two his senior.

‘You are an Eton boy, are you not, Master Richard?’

‘I have left Eton,’ was the lad’s stiff reply, ‘and am going to college.’

‘You are going to be a clergyman, then?’

‘Not if I know it,’ was Dick’s prompt rejoinder; ‘that is,’ added he, with a sudden reflection that this reply was not complimentary to the rector, ‘I don’t feel cut out for the pulpit. I hope to go into the army.’ Here he stole a glance towards his father, who was regarding him steadfastly.

‘Richard is young to choose his profession just yet,’ observed Mr. Talbot.

‘But one doesn’t want Latin and Greek to be a soldier,’ urged De Blaise. ‘When I joined my regiment I knew no word of either.’

‘Perhaps you were not an officer,’ said Dick coolly.

De Blaise's eyes flashed fire.

'In France, boy, we learn our trade before we pretend to teach it to others.'

'There is much to be said in favour of both systems,' said the rector, gently. 'I dare say Mr. de Blaise, you smoke. While Dick has his dinner, if you would like a cigar——'

'That is what above all things I should like,' cried the Frenchman, jumping up. 'I shall see you again, Mr. Talbot.'

'Yes—in the morning. I am an early riser, and I also retire early. Mr. Freeman will show you to your room.'

They shook hands, and with a ceremonious bow to Richard, which that young gentleman returned to the soup tureen which had just made its appearance, De Blaise left the room with the rector.

'Now,' thought Dick, 'we shall have a row.'

A sign that his father had given to Mr. Freeman to take the young Frenchman away had not escaped the boy's quick eye. It was in order, he thought, to get him

alone, and he was quite prepared for a jobation. But Mr. Talbot's manner, although grave, was by no means stern; and his voice was gentler than usual as he inquired of his son after Lady Earnshaw's health.

'Oh, grandmamma's all right, father. I am afraid I was a little too much for her to manage, and that's why I came home earlier. She has written this letter, to say as much.'

Mr. Talbot opened the envelope without remark.

'Now for the thunderbolt,' muttered Dick, as he sipped his sherry. But his father, though he had apparently possessed himself of the contents of the epistle, said nothing, but regarded him with the same passive yet kindly expression as before. This touched the young gentleman, or, as he would himself have expressed it, 'fetched' him. 'I hope grandmamma does not complain of me very much, sir,' said he, softly.

'No, there is no great harm done. It

seems, at all events, you are rather a favourite of hers, in spite of your misdeeds. What were they, for she does not mention them in detail ?'

'Well, I sat up rather late one night.'

'That's bad. Lads should go to bed betimes. You must be tired to-night after your journey, and the sooner you get your head on your pillow the better.'

'I am not tired, thank you, sir.'

He had an idea in his head which he feared his father was about to nip in the bud ; but he did not do so. He seemed to have forgotten what he had said last altogether, and to be once more immersed in sombre thoughts.

'Your Aunt Edith was in Gresham Street, I suppose,' said he presently.

'Yes, father.'

'Then that priest—what's his name?—Vane, was there too, I'll warrant.'

'Well, no, sir ; he only came to see me safe off the premises, as it were, and as far as the railway station. I don't think grandmamma likes him much.'

'I am glad to hear it. He is a very dangerous person.'

'Well, yes; I thought him an insinuating beggar.'

'He is a Jesuit in disguise,' said Mr. Talbot.

'Very likely. But I must say this, father, Aunt Edith has been jolly good to me; better than I can tell you. She has behaved like a brick.'

'Indeed!' The word slid from his lips like a lump of ice.

'Of course I don't pretend to know the rights and wrongs of her opinions; but I wish—I mean I think you are inclined to be a little hard upon Aunt Edie.'

'She is half a Papist.'

It was upon the tip of Dick's tongue to say, 'And is not this Frenchman, of whom you make so much' (for he had 'heard things'), 'a whole one?' He had for once, however, the good sense to keep his thoughts to himself.

'That she has been very civil to you, Richard,' continued the other, 'I do not

doubt. Perhaps you have met with something in your classical studies about *Danaos et dona ferentes*.'

'She did tip me very handsomely,' answered the boy, with a blush. 'She is as generous as you are yourself, father.'

'It is probable she wishes to make a convert of you,' was the harsh reply.

'Of me, father!' Dick laughed a merry laugh. If this was so, he thought Aunt Edie must be of a sanguine temperament.

'When we think ourselves safest, my lad, we are often in the greatest danger. We cannot be too suspicious of the advances of so insidious a foe.'

'Aunt Edith a foe, sir! and insidious! I cannot believe it.'

'Yet it is certainly true. I am speaking, of course, of her principles; against herself personally—to you, at least—I have not a word to say. Do not let us argue the matter.'

Then they fell to talking about Eton and the lad's studies and pursuits, in which Mr. Talbot, to say truth, had never before ex-

hibited much interest. He spoke somewhat mechanically and with effort, but of that the boy was unconscious ; he chattered on about his school-friends, and troubles, and pleasures, as though to a listener altogether new. He would, perhaps, have given his father all his confidence—confessed even to that financial operation performed on the head-master—but for a tinge of jealousy with respect to the young Frenchman ; if it came to confession, why shouldn't the governor confess to *him* ? He was quite old enough to understand such matters.

Presently the gong beat for evening prayers, and the servants came trooping in as usual.

It was Mr. Talbot's habit, after reading certain portions of Scripture, to deliver a short discourse. On this occasion he drew a picture of the life of a bad man, 'known well to me in my own unregenerate days,' he said, and who had died in mortal sin. Having described the hopelessness of such a man's position, he contrasted it with the

future lot of the enemies of the true Church—the Papists and their congeners—and expressed his conviction that their punishment would be even more severe. Dick understood quite well to whom these latter observations pointed, and for whose benefit they were made. But he had some curiosity to know the name of the unfortunate gentleman to whom personal allusion had been made ; and he expressed it.

‘I was speaking of your grandfather, Lord Earnshaw,’ said Mr. Talbot, coldly.

‘By jingo!’ cried Dick, for it struck him this was going rather far—‘I mean was he very bad, sir?’

‘As a man he could not be worse. Yet he did less harm than many apparently good people whose principles are antagonistic to true religion. Good-night, my boy, and Heaven defend you from all evil, spiritual and temporal.’

For the first time for years he kissed the boy, as he thus invoked on him the Divine protection.

Again Dick felt deeply moved. It was

plain the governor was really fond of him, thought he, as he took up his bed-candle and moved off towards his chamber. How much better it would have been if he had made a clean breast of it about the 'tenner' and the 'ticker'—the ten pounds and the watch. But he felt somehow that he couldn't do that while this Frenchman was in the house. Why had he not been made to come in to prayers like other people? He was probably, it was true, a Papist, and would have found some of the governor's remarks a little 'hot,' and yet it was his father's boast that he spared no one, but delivered the Truth to all men, whether in season or out of season. This fellow was enjoying a cigar all this time; why should not he (Dick) enjoy one too? He had at least as good a right as the other to the use of the smoking-room. His father, indeed, had taken it for granted that he was going to bed; but then neither his father nor the rector were aware that he was addicted to tobacco. This De Blaise had called him a schoolboy, seeing,

perhaps, that he was treated as such. It was high time that he should assert himself. He would join the rector and this stranger in the smoking-room, if they were still there, and have a cigar before he went to bed.



CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE SMOKING-ROOM.

THAT 'youth and age cannot live together' is a statement which has been disproved by experience ; but that they cannot do so harmoniously without some exceptional characteristics on one side—namely, on that of age—is very true.

The old man must be, if not young in mind, sufficiently mindful of his own youth to make allowances for the weaknesses of that period of life ; not too dogmatic ; and of a gentle and kindly disposition. This is far more to the purpose than mere cheerfulness. It has been well observed that the vivacity which sometimes distinguishes old age is very like folly, and there are

none who recognise this more readily than the young. The great difficulty in the matter is social intercourse. The mature mind finds it not only wearisome, but often impossible, to chime in with the views of youth—which it has entertained itself, at one time, and found them to be chimerical.

The Rev. Giles Freeman, Rector of Durnton Regis, an eloquent and popular theologian, had not many ideas in common with Mr. Charles de Blaise, a sub-lieutenant of French infantry, and national in his notions to the backbone. Also, more than a quarter of a century of years yawned between them. It may have seemed, therefore, no trifling obligation under which the Rector laid his friend, when he took the young soldier off his shoulders that evening at the Tower, and on to his own. There were two advantages, however, to be placed in the other side of the scale. First, Tobacco : magic mitigator of conversational woe ; balm of all boredom ; blest chloroform that fits the mind to bear all shocks, or, rather, which plucks from them

their offence and jar. And, secondly, the Improvement of Occasion—a spiritual art on which the Rector prided himself. He would not have shrunk from tackling the Pope himself, if he had found his Holiness *tête-à-tête* with him ; and he had actually succeeded in publicly converting—though it was whispered not for the first time—a Jew. He had never before tried his hand on a Frenchman, because of his ignorance of the language of that benighted nation : but here was one who could speak English ; young, too, and doubtless malleable as to his mind, as was Mr. Charles de Blaise, the opportunity was really a very tempting one.

Mr. Talbot did not smoke. That insignificant vice had been discarded with his larger ones when he had renounced the world and its gauds ; but he had a considerable supply of cigars in stock, of the most unexceptionable brands, when this revolution took place in his opinions, and some of these were still on hand, notwithstanding the Rector's occasional inroads on

them. He himself was far too sagacious a theologian to despise the genial weed, which is the very begetter of thought, and inclines all men to listen to their fellow-creatures. Some of his most successful discourses of a private nature had been delivered under cover of tobacco smoke, and, aided by its soothing influence, he, had received subscriptions, both of a material and spiritual kind, from apparently quite hopeless quarters. It was thought by the sporting gentry who formed the chief society about Durnton Regis, not, indeed, that 'there could be no nonsense about the Rector, since he took his cigar like a man,' but that he, or rather what he said, couldn't be *all* nonsense; which, with foxhunters, was a point gained.

Mr. Charles de Blaise was certainly not a foxhunter; but he probably stood in far greater need of spiritual counsel than the hardest rider in Suffolk. It was bad enough to be tepid about religious matters, as most of the members of the Durnton Hunt were, and especially their principal,

that once famous M.F.H. Mr. Reginald Pole, but it was worse to have embraced an erring faith.

Reasoning upon these premises, the good Rector, after the puff preliminary, and a little genial talk, put a question or two to his young companion about the Established Church of his native land, and the malign influence of its priesthood. The good Irish Catholic (of the upper ranks) does not hesitate to 'make hay' of his pastor; the Scotchman's store of wit would be bare indeed if you took away his jokes against 'the minister;' but the Frenchman of the True Church (of whom there are a few hundred males perhaps still in existence) sticks by his priest, and resents alike the jeer of the infidel and the innuendo of the Protestant. The good Rector was aware of this, and had got his fireman's hose in readiness in case of an outburst of pious but perverted indignation.

This precaution, however, was unnecessary, for Mr. Charles de Blaise only burst out laughing, as though that first probe

had tickled him, and plunged at once into ecclesiastical tales of humour. It was not easy to astonish the Rev. Giles Freeman with stories to the discredit of the Romish clergy, but it is fair to Mr. de Blaise's talents for narrative (aided, it must be owned, by his powers of imagination) to say that he *did* astonish him. He was compelled to admit that he could not have believed that such things were had he not heard them from the lips of his young friend with his own ears. There were little touches now and then which seemed to show the narrator himself in rather a dubious light; one, for example, in which he described himself as confessing to a priest 'for fun' a string of personal transgressions, which began in peccadilloes, but ended in such atrocities as gradually lifted the good father's hair till it stood around his tonsure like pollards about a small round pond. The Rector would certainly have felt it his duty to reprove the young man had not the story told against confession—a practice especially distasteful to

him. Upon the whole, he found his communications very interesting, and only wished he had not forgotten his note-book.

No man, however, worthy of the name—and certainly no clergyman—will ‘fag out’ the whole evening to another man’s bat, and waive his own right to an innings. The time arrived when Mr. Freeman felt that he had listened long enough, and must take his turn at the wicket. He could not conceal from himself that the ideas of his companion, though as admirable (as far as they went) as they were unexpected, had still only a negative virtue. He felt that he must be taking a good deal for granted in supposing that the young gentleman belonged to his own particular branch of the Reformed faith, or, perhaps, to any faith at all. He had a shrewd suspicion that the dogmatic eloquence that fired his lips when in the pulpit of Durnton Regis would be out of place as respected the present audience; but he had weapons adapted for almost every description of the spiritual foe. Perhaps the strongest, and certainly

the most favourite one with that army of the faithful of which he was so distinguished a leader, is the Improving Anecdote. When the stomach is too weak for theological argument this pabulum is a very *Revalenta Arabica*—pleasant as to taste, wholesome as to effect ; and, if one can only swallow it, easy of digestion. And it must be said to his credit that, like the immortal Dr. Sangrado, the Rector believed in his own remedies. Let those whose higher faith does not stoop 'to fix itself to form' say what they will, Mr. Freeman was an honest man, and if he trod what seemed to some a narrow way, he believed it to be the right one. Lady Earnshaw had called him a toady, but that hard word was by no means applicable to him. He had, it is true, that undue deference for rank and wealth which is so often found in persons of his cloth, and which is, perhaps, their most unbecoming attribute ; but he was no sycophant or time-server. If he had an eye for the loaves and fishes, he dispensed them, when he had once got

them for his own, with a liberal hand. If he knocked down the Infidel and the Ritualist, he picked up the poor man, who was neither the one nor the other, and while his blows were wind, his help was solid. As to his relations with Mr. Talbot, which had especially aroused her ladyship's wrath, and had set even Sister Edith's gentle nature against him, it must be remembered that he had been made Rector of Durnton by that gentleman, and was therefore bound to him by a strong tie of gratitude. He was his squire, and therefore he respected him; he was his co-religionist, and that turned his heart towards him more than all. There had been a time when his London congregation had shown signs of faltering on the path whereby he would have led them heavenwards. He had given them too strong meat, and had persisted in administering that diet (a circumstance that did not look like love of self) till many had left him, and gone elsewhere for spiritual sustenance. As he lived by his pew-rents, this would have sadly strait-

ened his pecuniary means but for the patronage of the living of Durnton Regis happening just then to fall into the hands that conferred it upon him. If the Rector seemed over-mindful of this good service, it did not, at least, arise from that gratitude which is the keen sense of favours to come. Mr. Talbot could do no more for him. And if he thus stood excused with reference to his social behaviour, he still less needed an apology for his spiritual teaching. It was clogged, no doubt, with prejudice, and narrowed by dogma; but there was sound bottom under the mud. He could almost say of his theological discourses what our Laureate says of one of his divinest melodies: 'I do but pipe because I must, and sing but as the linnet sings.' It is not that excellent bird's fault that he rather frequently appeals to ears that have no taste for music.

A propos of the non-necessity of the existence of priestcraft, and of the direct government of the world, Mr. Freeman had a famous story, which had often done

duty in the pulpit, called the 'Four Acre Field.' It had no precise date, and a variable locality, but the Rector's belief in its genuineness was perfectly *bonâ fide*. A certain farmer, of infidel tenets, and with a disposition to grumble even more than customary with men of his class, had a certain field of young corn. A neighbour, wishing to be civil, observed to him that this was a very promising patch of wheat. 'Yes,' granted he, 'it'll do well enough, I dare say, if Providence will only let it alone.' It was not a pleasant remark, and the result that followed was particularly unpleasant. Providence *did* let it alone. No sun shone on it, no shower fell on it; that promising patch of wheat withered away.

It is doubtful whether the Rector himself quite recognised the enormous importance that this story must needs have, if it were really true, in the eyes of the world at large. It was to him, and to most of his congregation, merely a striking illustration of the Divine influence upon human

affairs, about which they entertained no doubt.

Not a trace of incredulity exhibited itself on Mr. de Blaise's face at this marvellous recital. He merely waved away the tobacco smoke before his face, as he inquired:

'And when did this happen, my dear sir?'

'Well — it was within living memory,' observed the Rector, 'though I cannot say exactly when.'

'And where?'

Without being put at all in an offensive way, this question was disagreeable. The Rector had always been accustomed to speak of the place as 'in a certain county of England,' and it being 'certain,' none of his hearers had thought it necessary to make more particular inquiries.

'I believe,' said the Rector, searching vaguely in his mind for some rudiments of recollection, and even, perhaps, for a wheat county which should not be in the immediate neighbourhood, 'I believe it was in Wiltshire.'

‘Then, was it dark over that field when the sun shone, and dry when the rain fell everywhere else?’

‘I suppose so; though, of course, I was not there.’

‘And you have never seen this withered field?’

‘No; I have not.’

‘If you *had*,’ said De Blaise softly, ‘I should not have had a word to say; the fact would have been established; but, under the circumstances, there is no personal discourtesy in my remarking that I don’t believe that story.’

‘You don’t believe it?’

‘Not one word of it.’

A smile of pity lit up the Rector’s features. ‘You are sadly sceptical, my dear sir; but I am sure that there are the elements of good in you. I am now about to relate to you an event which has come within my own personal experience, and for the facts of which I give you my personal assurance. The circumstance in question happened—Hullo! Richard.’

For here Dick had entered the room, with his bed-candle in his hand, which he at once extinguished in sign that he had not come in merely to say good-night.

‘Why, we thought you had gone to bed.’

‘Did you? Well, I’m not, you see. I am going to have a cigar,’ and he took one out of the box that lay on the table.

There had been times when the Rector had had considerable authority over Master Richard, but this had been exercised more and more rarely of late years; and there was that in the young gentleman’s eye that warned his pastor not to attempt to exercise it now. It was very annoying that he should have come in at that interesting juncture, on the eve of a most important narration. Moreover, the Rector knew that the young man’s thus seeking the companionship of De Blaise would be extremely distasteful to his host; but he could not order him to his room like a schoolboy. There was nothing for it but to let matters take their course. The

cigar was well flavoured, and he hoped it might have such an effect upon the young gentleman as might ensure his prompt retirement.

It is a mistake, however, to suppose that nothing is learned at Eton save Latin verses. Dick had smoked almost as many varieties of the weed, and as bad ones, as the Queen's Tobacco Pipe at the docks, and what he was now inhaling tasted as mild to one of his experience as mother's milk. He saw that his presence was not welcome to the Rector, which of itself would at once have determined him to sit the reverend gentleman out. He thought, too, he detected an expression of amused contempt for himself and a humorous appreciation of the situation in De Blaise's face, and this stung him to the quick. He would let him know, if the occasion should demand it, which of them was in that room by right, and which by sufferance.

'You seem to have nothing to drink,' observed he, ringing the bell, and speaking with the air of a host apologising for the

want of hospitality. 'Beeswing' (this to the astonished butler, whose rightful name was Ramsden) 'bring some gin, lemons, and nutmeg, and a kettle of boiling water. —Did you ever taste gin-punch, Mr. de Blaise?'

Mr. de Blaise had tasted punch *à la Romaine*, but gin-punch, he said, was unknown to him.

'By jingo!' said Dick to himself, 'I'll give it him pretty stiff.'

'But, my dear Richard,' said the Rector blandly, 'is it not rather late? And are you sure your father would approve of having punch at this hour?'

'I am sure my father would be quite distressed,' answered Dick coolly, 'that our guest should have had all this smoke without anything to drink with it. And as to the time, we sleep in the house you know, so that is no matter to *us*. A tumbler of punch, however, would do you no harm before you set out for home, and I think I can promise you it will be well brewed.'

People talk of 'London Assurance,' but Eton assurance is also 'highly commended' by the best judges. It was plain that Dick meant to have his own way, and 'if he is like this *before* the punch,' groaned the Rector to himself, 'what will he be after it?'

He had hoped that De Blaise would have declined the offer of refreshment; but the Frenchman seemed to take the same pleasure in watching the humours of his youthful host as is experienced by the visitors in the monkey-house at the Zoological Gardens. The materials having arrived, Dick mixed them with an artistic, but what is called in cookery a somewhat 'heavy' hand, for his companions and himself.

'Good gracious,' said the Rector, coughing, and with watery eyes, 'you have made it very strong, my dear Richard.'

'One drop of water would spoil it,' returned the young gentleman confidently. 'It is made from the receipt at the "Christopher."''

‘What is the Christopher?’ inquired the Frenchman.

‘He is the Patron Spirit of Eton,’ answered Richard solemnly—‘*Floreat Etona, esto perpetua* ;’ and he bowed his head as he had seen Aunt Edith do, and in accordance, as he supposed, with Roman Catholic ritual.

To Mr. Freeman, who was familiar with Master Richard’s manner, it was evident that this was said with the object of annoying De Blaise ; but the young Frenchman only bowed, as Dick did, and puffed at his cigar. He seemed good-natured, and not quick to take offence ; and the two boys could scarcely do one another much harm. Mr. Talbot’s objection to their coming together was, after all, but a sentimental one. And really it was high time that he (the Rector) should be walking home.

From this apologetic line of argument it may be gathered that Mr. Freeman had in the background a solid reason for taking his departure ; he had a wife at home of

whom it was rumoured that she too, like her husband, had the gift of preaching, and of preaching at *him*. She obeyed the Apostolic ordinance addressed to her sex of keeping silence in the church, but that was the limit of her reticence. Like the lady immortalised by Tom Hood, she 'lectured in her nightgown,' and this performance was regarded by the Rector with little less disfavour than that of preaching in a surplice. It was probable that a homily upon late hours might be supplemented on this occasion with a few words about tarrying at the wine cup, and some incidental reference to the seductions of tobacco. His companions knew nothing of these arguments that were appealing to him so strongly, but only perceived that he was uneasy ; he saw a form [in white raiment] they could not see, which beckoned him away ; he heard a voice they could not hear that said 'You must not stay.' It must be acknowledged that his position was embarrassing ; on the one hand there was his duty to his friend and patron, who,

he knew, would wish him to see these young gentlemen safely bestowed for the night in their respective rooms; on the other, there was his duty to his lady and mistress. What married man will blame him for choosing the less perilous course?

‘Come, Richard,’ said he, rising, ‘enough is as good as a feast; I think one glass of your punch is sufficient for any man. Suppose we go to bed.’

‘My dear sir,’ said Richard, ‘it would be absolutely sinful to leave so much excellent drink in the bowl. It is not the kind of punch, you see, that is good *cold*.’

‘Must you really go?’ said De Blaise, as he shook hands; ‘I had hoped to have been favoured with that personal experience of yours of providential interposition.’

‘We have experienced it ourselves,’ said Dick, as the door closed behind the Rector’s portly form; ‘the parson’s gone.’

‘So you don’t like the good curé, eh, Master Richard,’ said De Blaise laughing, and sipping at his second glass.

‘Nobody calls me Master Richard except

the servants,' observed Dick in a white heat of rage, and swallowing his No. 2 at a gulp, 'and as to the curate, as you term him, he's a rector.'

'It appears to me that you are not so accustomed to strong liquor, young gentleman, as you have represented to be the case.'

'Nothing appears as it really is, my good sir,' answered Dick affably, 'to a fellow who is drunk; you, for instance, probably see two of me.'

'The saints forbid. One is more than sufficient for pleasure.'

The sarcasm was a little too subtle for poor Dick, who was by this time busy with his third tumbler, but he understood enough of it to comprehend that he was insulted.

'If you were not under my own roof, Mr. de Blaise, I should tell you what I think of Frenchmen in general, and of you in particular.'

'If I were not under your roof, boy,' answered the other with a hot spot on

each of his high cheek bones, 'I would chastise you for your impertinence.'

'You chastise *me*?'

'Yes, if it were not for the obligations which I am under to your father——'

'You should rather say to your mother,' put in Dick like a rapier thrust under the guard.

The Frenchman started to his feet with a face of fire. '*What*, you viper? Is it possible that you dare to imagine——'

Dick's derisive laugh cut short the sentence, and oversetting the little table that stood between them, with its bowl and glasses, with an oath, De Blaise flew at the lad's throat.

If he had succeeded in getting so far at the first dash, it would probably have gone hard with Master Richard, but that agile youth, who had studied, and by no means theoretically only, the art of self-defence, stepped aside, and to speak scientifically, stopped him neatly with his right. This saved him, however, but for the moment; a man must be strong as well as skilful

to keep a foe at bay with his fists; and the next instant the two lads were grappling with one another in a style unknown to civilised warfare, and only in estimation, among wild cats. The Frenchman was the elder and stronger, but in France 'we do not' (as I once heard a Frenchman say), "'devil up" our physique except at billiards,' whereas Dick's practice with the oar and the bat, and especially his experience of football scrimmages, made the conflict more equal than could have been supposed.

It was still doubtful which of these writhing, furious young creatures would have floored the other, when the door opened and each of the combatants was suddenly seized, torn asunder from the other, and held apart by an arm of iron.

'Are you drunk or mad, Charles, that you brawl at midnight beneath my roof as though it were a tavern in Belleville!' cried a stern, metallic voice; 'and you, Richard, are you not ashamed to treat in this fashion a stranger and your father's guest?'

Francis Talbot was in his dressing-gown and slippers, a garb not conducive to dramatic effect, but as he stood, firm as a rod of steel, glancing from one to the other of the flushed and breathless objects of his reproof, he looked not only the master of the situation, but of much else besides. He was no taller than the others, but he seemed to tower above them; his face, his voice were instinct with a nature far more powerful than theirs; his eyes, always bright and fervid, had a flash of 'will' in them, before which these lesser spirits cowered abashed.

De Blaise was the first to speak. 'I confess, sir, I forgot myself, when I struck your son,' said he, submissively.

'He did not strike me first,' said Dick, honestly enough, yet not perhaps without a touch of pride in the confession; 'and it was I who gave the provocation.'

'What was that?'

'A thoughtless insult,' put in De Blaise hastily. 'There is no need to repeat it; the young gentleman did not know what he was saying.'

The 'young gentleman' was by no means prepared to endorse that statement, which was accompanied by a significant glance at the broken punch-bowl; but on the other hand it was impossible to attempt in his father's presence any explanation of what had recently happened.

'At all events, Richard, you little knew what you were *doing*,' observed Mr. Talbot, in stern tones. His face was working with intense emotion, and his fingers, which until now had held the quondam combatants as in a vice, relaxed their grasp. 'Shake hands with him, and go to your room; and ere you lay your head upon your pillow, thank Heaven for having sent me hither to prevent a grievous sin, perchance a crime.'

Richard held out his hand somewhat doggedly, which the other formally took and dropped. They were a pair that would make peace with one another under compulsion, but never friends.

Dick looked towards his father, but there was to be no second farewell for him that

night; he only pointed sternly to the door.

‘A grievous sin,’ muttered the young scapegrace, as he went thoughtfully up the broad oak stairs (for recent events had sobered him), ‘must needs mean striking my brother. Well, *that* is no great matter, for Jones *major* and Jones *minor* had twenty rounds in “sixpenny corner” last half, and were none the worse friends for it. And as for the “crime,” that would have been all upon one side, for the Frenchman would have throttled me in a minute more, though I would rather die than confess it. Well, I don’t wish to be hard upon the governor, but I don’t think that fellow ought ever to have come here.’



CHAPTER IX.

THE STAIN OF BLOOD.

WHEN Richard Talbot awoke next morning he had but a confused consciousness of what had taken place over night. The punch that he had brewed so strong, with a view to "floor" the Rector, had had its effect upon his own brain. He had a general notion that he had fought a Frenchman, but no idea of the cause of quarrel. He had an indistinct recollection of having made some insulting observation to him—probably in connection with Waterloo. His father had been angry with him for having outraged the rights of hospitality—yes, he remembered now—and upon another account. This gave him pause, and set his

mind in an unwonted train of serious reflection. On the preceding evening he had been full of his own affairs, jealous of the new-comer, indignant at the fancied slights put upon his youth, wounded in his self-love and pride of place. He had felt that he had cause of complaint against his father for putting himself and this De Blaise upon an equality. Blood, it is true, was said to be thicker than water; but then it must be the legitimate fluid. What business had this son of a—well, of a Frenchwoman, in Talbot Tower? and so on. *Now* his mind took a larger view. So far as he knew, this lad had never set foot in his father's house before, while he himself had been always there, its recognised heir and future head. Not a word had been breathed of De Blaise except in hints and innuendoes from base persons, and always with a sneer. If his father had corresponded with him, it had been in secret; if he had helped him, as he doubtless had, it had been by stealth and out of his abundance. He (Richard) had not been stinted

to supply his rival's need. Above all, it came home to him that there had been sorrow and shame in his father's face last night, doubtless for a sin (of which he himself had already begun both to think and speak lightly) of nearly twenty years ago. He perceived dimly how heavily the recollection of it must needs weigh with a man who for all that space had almost forborne to smile, from the keen sense of his own unworthiness. He even understood the humiliation that his father must have experienced at seeing De Blaise and him at the same table, especially if he had detected his son's suspicion of the relationship that existed between host and guest.

In the case of any other man of austere piety and rigid morals, Dick would doubtless have experienced a malicious satisfaction in this revelation of his frailty; but, though deficient in reverence, the lad was not without good feeling. In the case of his 'governor,' he felt that it was a painful circumstance, and one which it behoved him to ignore instead of 'setting his back

up,' as he had so foolishly done, against the interloper. It was certainly not De Blaise's fault that he had come into the world in an irregular manner; and it was a shame to grudge him a few hours of consanguineous intercourse, a good dinner (which was probably rare with any Frenchman), and a couple of cigars. It did not even strike the boy (as it would have struck some much better principled young gentlemen) that the knowledge of this indiscretion on his father's part might stand himself in good stead when any peccadilloes of his own might be under the paternal consideration. On the contrary, he felt sorry for 'the poor governor' every way, and determined, in his own behaviour to De Blaise, to show that the blood between them was not bad blood. If he could not like him, he would at least be civil to him, and do the honours of the Tower and its surroundings in a manner that should be unmistakably friendly and without patronage.

Full of these magnanimous resolves, he descended to the breakfast-room, and, find-

ing it without a tenant, repaired to the library, where his father was accustomed to read every morning for some hours before he held forth in prayer to the household. But that room was also empty. Dick opened a window and stepped out upon the stately terrace. A lovely view—the fairest by far to be seen from any house in Suffolk—lay open to his eyes. Beneath him lay the garden, which girdled the whole edifice ; beyond it, another zone, the moat, which, though it seemed to sleep and have no other mission but to mirror the flowers and trees, and one tall tower with its flagstaff, crept slowly on, as surely and undemonstratively as Time itself. Across the moat was a small deer park, well wooded and picturesquely knolled and surrounded by a thick belt of trees. If this home estate was not very extensive, it contained almost every element of beauty. The master of Talbot Towers might have said to himself, ‘I am monarch of all I survey,’ without dispute—for one doesn’t survey mortgages ; and as to Dick, he had never even heard

of such things. He regarded not without some feeling of ancestral pride, and also of future possession, the swelling upland with its spotted tenants and the gorgeous beds of flowers whose flames the sullen stream was compelled to reflect.

He did not think of the long line of Talbots that had preceded him, who had gazed on this same scene a thousand times, and had all gone to their account ; he did not dwell upon the glories of his house achieved in far back times, and, indeed, save to some students of the county history, these were somewhat vague and unintelligible ; but he enjoyed that sense of inherited position which is so dear to English youths of his class, and which perhaps demands the absence of great intellectual faculties. It was possible that in the years to come he might look upon all these things as merely money's worth ; and in the same spirit that caused the long-descended rake, when remonstrated with for parting with land which had been so many centuries in his family, to say, ' Then it is high time it

went out of it.' A time might come when he might harter them for money ; but to-day it seemed that nothing would part him from them. Every stone of the castle (for the stately pile had the right to be called so), every tree in the park, seemed a sort of sacred possession, and what was curious, and might have seemed to some to have boded ill for the prospects of Miss Lucy Lindon, he did not think of her in connection with them. She formed another subject of thought altogether, equally pleasing in its way, but it must be confessed, though he never dreamt of wronging her, by no means so enduring. The only person who had a share in his present reflections was Charles de Blaise, who, though he had the Talbot blood in his veins, had no claim to any of this pleasant prospect, and whom, 'poor devil,' he pitied accordingly. Indeed, for a moment he pictured himself in the other's place, resenting (as he felt he would have done) the accident of birth that placed him outside the pale of position and inheritance ; but a secret sense of humiliation

(which was intolerable to him) forbade further reflection upon this point. Moreover, the three peacocks who were wont to strut, and scream, and flutter their stately fans upon the terrace, caught sight of him at this moment, and associating his presence, as they were wont to do, with bread-crumbs, bore down upon him with outstretched necks. He would have returned to the breakfast-room for a roll to supply their demands but that the sound of wheels upon what was once the draw-bridge, but had for years given place to a permanent edifice of stone, attracted his attention; and to his surprise he saw his father driving home alone in the dogcart.

Mr. Talbot rarely stirred beyond the limits of his own domain, and when he did so, went in the closed carriage which, with its well-fed steeds, rolled to the country town (greatly to the scandal of good Churchmen) only on great spiritual occasions, such as temperance lectures, evangelical addresses and the like; it was even believed that the dogcart was in his

eyes a vessel (or a vehicle) of wrath, affected by godless persons who smoked cigars and were given to horseflesh, and scarcely to be used by Christian persons. Astounded as Dick was by the spectacle, he could not help observing how squarely his father sat on the high seat, and in how workmanlike a manner he handled the reins, though his face showed that he was giving no thought to the high-mettled mare at all.

On one occasion when he had been forbidden to leave the house on account of some boyish ailment, his father had played billiards with him, and, young as he was, he had been amazed by the brilliancy of his strokes and the skill which had seemed to manifest itself in spite of the carelessness of its possessor. What on earth (or even beyond it) could have caused a man of such excellent gifts to despise and suffer them to fall into disuse, and to take up with dusty tomes and 'bilious theology' (as he had heard Lady Earnshaw term it) in their place !

Here the great bell sounded for prayers, and Richard hurried in. His father was already seated at his desk, with his Bible before him, and the servants ranged in their places. De Blaise, however, was nowhere to be seen, at which he felt a slight recurrence of resentment, for that he should be excused attendance on such an occasion was favouritism indeed. Guests, it is true, were rare at Talbot Tower, but whoever did pass a night beneath its roof was expected to hear the Word read and expounded by its master before he broke his fast. Dick's eyes, which were not always on these occasions within his own control, wandered, among other places, to the breakfast-table, and observed that it was only laid for two persons; and it at once struck him that De Blaise had gone, and had probably been just taken by his father to the railway station. This was doubtless to prevent the repetition of any disagreement between himself and the young Frenchman, such as had occurred the preceding evening; a supposition which gave

him a relapse into repentance. It was shameful that his jealousy should have driven the lad thus precipitately from the shelter of the paternal roof.

Doubtless the same idea was in his father's mind, for he noticed that his discourse had reference to the avoidance of quarrels and ill-will. The tongue was a fire, and kindled (such was the preacher's homely metaphor) the grate of human passion, always ready laid, into unquenchable flame—whereat the housemaids looked at one another significantly. His father took his seat at the breakfast-table in silence, though he had not even wished his son good-morning, which Dick set down to resentment at his conduct. He therefore resolved to take the initiative in speaking of what had occurred.

'I hope, sir, that Mr. de Blaise has not left the house in consequence of my unjustifiable behaviour to him last night. I *said* I was sorry, as you know, but I had intended to make him a still more ample apology.'

‘Let us hope that the will will be taken for the deed,’ was the other’s quiet reply. ‘The young man, I think, bears no malice; and, moreover, it is improbable that you and he will ever meet again.’

‘Indeed, sir! Then I regret all the more—upon my honour I do—that I should have treated him with such discourtesy.’

Mr. Talbot rose and walked to the window. Dick noticed that he had touched no food, but only sipped his coffee. ‘Richard, there is a sad story about Charles de Blaise.’

Dick felt himself growing very hot and uncomfortable, but said nothing, though the other seemed to await a reply.

‘If you had not chanced to see him,’ he continued, ‘perhaps I should never have told you about it; but it is better as it is. The cup of shame that I have drunk so long in secret must now be emptied to the dregs.’

‘Indeed, sir, there is no need,’ observed Dick, earnestly. ‘If it gives you pain to tell me of any matter, it must needs give me pain to hear it.’

‘No need ; and pain !’ returned the other, with a grave amazement. ‘What is pain compared with sin ? It should be welcome rather than avoided, so that perchance, in mercy, some part of the punishment due to us may be remitted in the world to come. But that is impossible,’ he added, with despairing vehemence, and hastily pacing the room. ‘The lost soul is lost for ever.’

Dick thought this a very strong view of the case, and that it behoved him to combat it.

‘A fellow can only be sorry, sir, for whatever happens, and take care not to get into the same scrape—I mean——’

‘Great Heaven! what *do* you mean, boy?’ exclaimed Mr. Talbot, vehemently.

‘But there, there, how should you know ? how should you guess ? Richard,’ here his voice sank to a hollow whisper, ‘your father is a murderer !’

Dick started to his feet. His father a murderer ! He thought it more likely that he was a madman.

‘I killed Charles de Blaise’s father.’

‘Oh, sir, impossible! Or, if you did, it was in fair fight.’

‘What fight is fair in the sight of Heaven?’ inquired the other, striking his forehead with his hand. ‘I sent the man, with all his sins upon his head—and they were many—to perdition, boy.’

‘Then it was in a duel, sir—I am sure it was in a duel!’ cried Richard, vaguely. ‘He struck you first, perhaps. No Talbot could stand a blow.’

‘Yes, he struck me; and for that I took his heart’s blood. But before he struck me I had put an insult upon him greater than any blow.’

Dick was frozen with horror. His father had dishonoured the man, seduced his wife, and then slain him. According to his simple code of morals, picked up, as a boy’s morals often are, from talk and not from teaching, he conceived that it would have been the proper course to have fired in the air.

‘You are hardly old enough to understand it, Richard’ (Dick made a gesture to

signify that he was quite mistaken there, but the other did not seem to notice it), 'and yet I must needs tell you all. The burden is too great for me to bear alone ; moreover, it is the will of Heaven, manifested in your meeting Charles, that you should share it. Yes, yes. It is not as if you were a priest ; you are my own son, and it is right I should confess it, since the confession means humiliation, ignominy, and perhaps estrangement from my own flesh and blood.'

'No, sir, not that!' cried Dick, with a scarlet cheek. 'I stand by you, whatever has happened or can happen.'

'You speak as my own son,' was the grave rejoinder, 'and therefore like a child of this world. Listen, Richard. I am a sinful man, and in my youth I was a profligate and a castaway. There was no law so sacred that I did not outrage it ; no vice so vile but that I stooped to indulge in it. For all which some have thanked Heaven which showed them a way out of the darkness and made them saints, that so much

the more might the power of grace be magnified.' The hands of the speaker were clasped rigidly together; his face was turned upward with a look of steadfast yearning as though he was demanding as regarded his own case the secret of the world to come from heaven itself.

'Among other things—much worse—I was a gambler. At that time there was more public gaming in Paris than in London, and I often went there for that purpose. At one house where military men were chiefly wont to meet, I lost one night a thousand pounds. I was out of temper, and imagined that I was being cheated. My suspicions rested on a silent and sombre personage—an officer of hussars—who was always at the table, staking small sums. His clothes were shabby, and he wore his coat buttoned up high in an unusual manner. I was the dealer and missed a card; the man's hand was thrust into his breast, and it suddenly struck me that he had taken it. I taxed him with it on the instant, and he changed colour.

‘“You lie,” he said, and spoke truth ; but I was better known in that wild company than he, and they believed me.

‘“Search him, search him !” was the cry ; but he said, “No ; I will not be searched.”

‘“Then you confess yourself a cheat,” cried I. And then he struck me. I challenged him, of course, upon the spot. It all happened quicker than I tell it.’

Dick uttered a sigh of relief. After all it had been but a common duel, then, and there had been no help for it ; he answered something to that effect.

‘Common ? No, it was not common. The man was wild with rage ; and as I was the challenger he had the choice of how we were to kill each other. “I will shoot that villain,” he cried, “across a table.” This plan was objected to by my second, but for the honour of my country I thought it shameful to seem afraid. That is the world’s way : a man will shrink from no ordeal in order to keep the good opinion of his fellows ; but he counts as nothing that of the God who made him.’

‘Then did you fire at one another, sir, across a table?’

‘Yes; only the seconds decided that there should be no double murder: one of the pistols was to be loaded and one not; and we were to draw lots for choice. The weapons were in the house, and the thing took place at once, in a billiard-room that stood in the courtyard. De Blaise, for that was his name—I see him now, a pale, care-worn man, with hollow eyes that looked like coals of fire—had the first choice. As he took up the pistol his face lit up with joy. He flattered himself, from its weight, that he had made the lucky choice, that he had won the privilege of sending a fellow-creature to his long account.’

‘And you, father?’

‘I was still blind with passion. If I thought of anything, it was upon my losses; for in those days I feared neither God nor man. That is the one advantage—a short-lived one—that the infidel possesses. He does not fear to die. He deems it is to sleep for ever. Well were it for him if it

could be so. We fired together, and my antagonist fell. "The card is in his bosom," cried I, whom even Death itself had not made placable. But it was not there. It was found afterwards on the floor of the gaming-room, and nowhere near where De Blaise had stood. But when the doctor had stripped him to staunch the wound he found why the poor wretch had refused to permit himself to be searched. He had pawned his very shirt to gratify his passion for the gaming-table, and would not exhibit his poverty by disclosing that fact. "My wife—my children," were his last words. He had ruined them, but they were still dear to him; and I—yes, I, who stand before you—I had murdered the husband and the father.'

Dick was aghast with horror: the *dénouement* of the catastrophe had been altogether unexpected by him: his sense of justice, which (notwithstanding some modifications) was very strong in him, was outraged.

‘It was most sad, and most unfortunate,’ he murmured.

‘For him, but not for me,’ was the strange reply. ‘From that moment I became a new man: my eyes were opened; I saw myself as I really was, and thanks be to Heaven I was saved through another’s loss.’

To this the boy answered nothing: he knew what his father meant; he had heard him speak, before then, of the day of regeneration that had dawned upon him suddenly as a meteor-flash; but he could not bring himself *en rapport* with such views.

‘You provided, however, for the widow and the orphan, sir?’

‘Of course. The affair was hushed up, and I had hoped that it would never have been revealed to her by whose hand her husband fell; she knew it, however, though her children never did, and though for their sake she took my gold, she would never see my face. She died loathing the hand that fed her; they are all dead but

Charles. He is ignorant of the bond of blood that unites me to him, and I hope in Heaven's mercy will remain so. Nevertheless when I am gone, boy, see it is not sundered.'

'He shall be as my own brother,' said Dick, solemnly.

'There is no need for that, Richard. There would be danger in such intimacy: he belongs to a false faith. Let his allowance be continued—neither more nor less. It is sufficient for his needs—more by far than under other circumstances he could have hoped to possess. And now, my son,' he added, regarding the boy with a look of earnest inquiry, 'you know the worst.'

'What you have said, sir, is very sad,' said Richard, gravely. 'Still, when the worst was done, you did your best to remedy it. It seems to me if one is sorry for what one does amiss, and makes amends as far as one can, and if one acts honourably——'

'That is a perilous word, boy,' broke in

the other, sternly; 'the man who stands before you was a man of honour once himself.'

'Father,' put in Richard, stepping forward, with an unwonted impulse, and clasping the other's hand, 'your past with me, let it be what it may, can never outweigh your present. At all events it is not for me to condemn you, and I will not.'

'How strange, how sweet!' murmured the other, stroking the lad's hair with his thin fingers. 'How beguiling is the touch of nature! What are you thinking of, my son?'

'I am wondering, sir, whether you have made a confidant of others in connection with this sad subject.'

'With one other in England, yes; my lawyer has his instructions only concerning Charles's allowance; but Mr. Freeman, he knows why it is paid.'

'I am sorry, sir,' said Richard, softly. 'I would have wished that you had told no one else but me.'

'I had to wait, you see,' said his father.

gently ; 'and in the meantime the burden was too heavy to be borne alone. Perhaps even now, if Charles had not come over, I should have kept my secret from you.'

Dick was by nature kind and affectionate; but his character had up to this period been wholly without ballast. For the first time in his life he now felt something weighty pulling at his very heart-strings ; he was like a vessel, light and wind-tossed, out of which the anchor has been thrown, and holds.

'I hope, sir,' said he, modestly, 'to prove myself for the future worthy of your confidence.'

'That is well said,' answered his father thoughtfully, and with an earnest gaze. 'You will be worthy, no doubt, Richard—that is in the sense you mean it ; but confidence requires something else besides mutual affection. There must be sympathy.'

'I will endeavour to feel that, too, sir,' answered the lad, in a pained voice, the distress of which the other seemed to

comprehend, for once again he passed his hand over the boy's head caressingly. 'I cannot think perhaps exactly as you think, father, about religious matters; it would have been impossible for yourself to have done so at my age; but as regards the affairs of this world, surely a loving heart, and one which desires to act honestly——'

'Even for that there must be knowledge,' put in the other quickly and in reproving tones.

'Surely not, father; we all know right from wrong, however we may attempt to deceive ourselves.'

'You are young, Richard,' answered the other with irritation, 'or you would not talk so. The Jesuit does not know right from wrong, or rather such terms are not to be found in his vocabulary. He says this is good, and this is bad, meaning for his Church, which is the abomination of desolation—I have letters to write this morning, my lad, which will need all my attention, and my mind is shaken and ill at ease.'

And with a deep sigh Mr. Talbot abruptly left the room, and betook himself to the library.

Richard looked after him with an astonished air.

Momentous as his father's revelation had been, the interview left in the boy's mind a sense of incompleteness and even dissatisfaction. There had been a moment or so, he thought, when he and his father had been about to come, if not to a mutual understanding of one another (which was perhaps impossible), at least into very intimate relations. Dick had even had it on his tongue, in return for his father's confidence, to avow his passion for Lucy Lindon. That attachment might be unwise and injudicious (he had an impression that such would be the opinion of the world), but, after all, it was a mere bagatelle compared with gambling and the duello. The occasion had, therefore, seemed a favourable one for his confession; but there had suddenly come that change over his father's manner, that return to his old

reticence, which had immediately reacted upon the lad's feelings, and the opportunity had passed away. He pitied his father from the bottom of his heart; he felt that there was cause enough for his reserve and gloom, for which, for the future, he would take care to make allowance; nor did he respect him less on account of the crime of which he had accused himself; but, on the other hand, he had been drawn no nearer to him in the way of sympathy. His father had spoken truth when he had said that something else than mere mutual affection was required for this. Young as he was, Richard had had experience of the fact himself, and though he did not recognise its existence in so direct and logical a form, he could have given a practical illustration of it. He knew, for example, that his heart leapt up with a joy as sympathetic as intense at the thought of seeing Lucy Lindon on the morrow.



CHAPTER X.

THE KEEP AT DURNTON.

MR. RICHARD TALBOT, like most young gentlemen of his class, was not addicted to poetry ; he had read, it is true, Euripides and Æschylus, as well as Horace and Virgil ; but he knew as much of their poetical merits as a monkey who has been associated with a barrel-organ knows of the charms of music. He had been obliged to 'grind' at them, as he called it, but the effect produced upon his mind by their beauties had been absolutely *nil*. He could scan their verses, and give to each measure its appropriate name, and there was an end of the advantage of his classical studies. If he had been set to work at any English poet,

it is probable he would not have made much more of that, though, if poetry is to be taught at all, one would imagine that should have been the way to it; and yet a whole stanza of the 'In Memoriam' (which he had never read) is now running through his mind as he walks through the long elm avenue that joins the Tower to the village :

'I wake, I rise, from end to end
Of all the landscape underneath
I find no place that does not breathe
Some gracious memory of my friend.'

Such was literally the case with Dick, except that for 'friend' one must use a tenderer title. There was not a spot in all the parish that did not remind him of his sweetheart. Of late his affection for her had assumed another form from that it had worn when as children they had roamed together the level flats of Durnton; but those dear memories of childhood gave his later love an added charm. He remembered as though it were yesterday the first time that they had seen a heron in

the marshes, a weasel in the woods. He recalled that adventurous night, as it had seemed to them, when they had gone forth to see the Pharos at the corner of 'the spit,' as the thin reach of sand was called, lit up with its new light. He had heard his father and the Rector speak of it as something marvellous, and Lucy had 'heard tell' of it till her fervid mind had pictured to herself a scene equivalent to that of Vesuvius in eruption. The hour at which they then retired to rest in their respective dwellings had precluded them from the enjoyment of this spectacle, but the chivalrous Dick had volunteered his escort, and on one winter's night he escaped from domestic surveillance, and made a clandestine visit to 'the spinny,' as the cottage where she dwelt was called, from the little wood that environed it. He remembered how his heart had beaten (not with love alone) as he passed through the hazel copse, and by the weird forms of the pollard elms that fringed the brook; how he had thrown the pebbles against

Lucy's lattice, and waited with chattering teeth till the latch softly clicked and she appeared in hood and cloak, trembling from head to foot with eagerness for the adventure. His fears had vanished then (for was it not his mission to protect her?) and they had hurried down to the little quay.

In front ran the river ; beyond, and parallel to it, the long spit of sand on which the lighthouse stood on the edge of the sea. The river, viewed from this spot on a summer-day, was very striking, and the only one in the neighbourhood (save that from the Tower terrace) that could be called picturesque. You saw 'the river-craft, mostly boats and barges, dropping down with the stream, and then, above the spit, the masts and sails of the ships at sea. 'The flying cloud, the frosty night,' imparted to this strange landscape a somewhat spectral appearance, which the sense of wrong-doing no doubt exaggerated. Worst of all, what they had come, at such a risk of discovery, to be-

hold was not to be seen ; the lighthouse was in its place as usual, but the great lantern that formed its head, so far from being ablaze with light, as they had been led to expect, was without a glimmer.

The children, hand-in-hand, looked at one another in hushed surprise.

'I can row—a little,' said Dick, 'and here is your father's boat, the *Nancy*.'

'You mean my stepfather's,' said Lucy, haughtily ; for young as she was, she knew that her mother had married beneath her in taking 'Handsome Georgie' for her second husband. 'Let us go across.'

'You are not afraid, then ?' said Dick admiringly ; the tide, as it happened, was upon the turn, and the stream less swift than usual, but the Durn was at no time a placid river. The boy had never been trusted to his own devices upon its dimpled dangerous eddies yet, far less with the charge of another's safety.

'I am never afraid when you are with me, Dick,' was the girl's reply—if she had offered him a million of money he would

not have deemed it so high an incentive to enterprise. To jump into Mr. Parkes' boat after he had seen Lucy bestowed in it, to unhitch its chain, and to push out into the river, was an easy task for the active lad; and easier still to glide down the stream towards the sea, for the wind was with them. But to manage the huge oars was not so easy. The effect of Dick's weak and unskilful stroke upon the movement of the boat was slight indeed, and not always in the desired direction. In fact, they had already missed the landing-place for the lighthouse, and were drifting out to sea. Lucy perceived his difficulty and their common danger, and, rising lightly from her post of honour at the stern, took her seat beside the lad.

'I can pull *too*,' said she, implying a compliment to his management of the oars that was scarcely deserved. There was plenty of room on the bench for both their little bodies, and they did their work with a will; but 'wisdom,' as we are justly told, 'is necessary to direct.' They would un-

doubtedly have been carried out into the Channel, and there drowned or frozen, had it not been for a consummate want of adroitness upon the part of Master Richard. At the very extremity of the spit projected a little rocky inlet, much avoided by mariners; as they were hurried by it he caught a crab, and fell backwards into the boat, the head of which, answering to Lucy's stroke, turned sharply into the very cove with a shock that smashed in the *Nancy's* timbers, but saved her occupants.

They scrambled, bruised and shaken, up the inhospitable shore, just in time to see their gallant bark descend in about three feet of water.

'By jingo !' cried Dick, 'that was a narrow shave. Aren't your legs wet just? Mine are.'

'That's nothing,' said Lucy. 'What will stepfather say when he comes to see his boat?'

'It is my governor that will have to pay for it,' said Dick, who was a little irritated, as men of all ages will be when they bark

their shins. 'Don't *you* fret. Only, how are we to get back again?'

'Well, at all events,' said Lucy the indomitable, 'we are on the right side—for the lighthouse.'

Dick regarded her with admiration. It is inconsistent with politeness to apply to a young lady the term of devil-may-care, nor indeed would it have so well fitted her character as that of her male companion; but she was certainly of a very resolute spirit. To the lighthouse, over the rough pebbles and wind-swept beach, they accordingly made their way. It was as dark as the night itself, and gave no sign of occupation, far less of illumination. Dick ran up the high steps that kept the entrance out of harm's way in flood-time, and thundered at the door. The keeper appeared with a look of much astonishment, and inquired of the child his name and business.

'I am Richard Talbot, of Talbot Tower, and I wish to see the new revolving light.'

'And the other one—who's she?' inquired the man, who was a good-natured, humorous fellow.

‘She is a young lady—un—under my protection,’ explained Dick, thinking justly that the disclosure of her relationship to Mr. George Parkes would not forward his views with any constituted authority.

‘Well, you must get an order from the Trinity House to admit two before you can see our light.’

‘That’s a lie!’ cried Dick; ‘other people have seen it without orders. You had better show it us, my man.’

‘And suppose I don’t, what then?’

‘Well, I shall shy stones at the lantern till I see it lit up.’

To this ultimatum the garrison surrendered with smothered mirth.

‘You may come in, young master, but the place to see our light is out at sea. It don’t show inland, so you might have spent all night in battering on us, and nothing would have come of it.’

Never since the days of the Lion Heart did an adventure so chivalrously undertaken have so ineffectual a result.

However, they were shown the wicks and the reflectors.

‘And is it possible,’ asked the genius of the lamp, ‘that you two young people have come all the way round by Swanborough at this hour o’ night?’ For though as the crow flies Durnton was close to the lighthouse, it was fifteen miles or so by the bridge and the road.

‘No,’ said Dick, ‘we rowed across the river.’

‘You—*you* rowed? What, all by yourselves? Why, where’s your boat?’

‘Sunk,’ said Dick, indifferently. ‘We sunk her as we landed.’ This as though he had done it on purpose, and in the tone of a smart naval officer describing a cutting-out expedition.

‘And whose boat was it as you sunk?’

‘Oh, it was Lucy’s—that is, George Pafkes’ boat, the *Nancy*.’

‘And how do you mean to get back again?’ That was beyond Dick’s power to guess, for, to say the truth, he had begun to distrust his own skill as an oars-

man, even if the boat belonging to the lighthouse should be placed at their disposal; but Lucy, with her fine pleading eyes, came to the rescue.

‘Well, we made sure that you would put us across.’

‘Oh, did you?’ said the man, with a good-natured grin. ‘Well, then, of course I must—“Mate,”’ he halloed to his fellow somewhere up the spiral stair: ‘“I have got a little job in hand. I’ll be back in half an hour.”’

The little man and little maid reached home, therefore, without further catastrophe, but the adventure was long talked about in the village, and always used to illustrate the indomitable force of Master Richard’s character. The boy only remembered it now (though it was fated to recur to him afterwards with a more special significance) in common with the other associations of the place with Lucy. Indeed, there was one locality that at the present moment occupied a far larger share in his recollections than the lighthouse.

This was the tall and tottering ruin—relic of some castle, compared with which his own home was but of yesterday—called ‘The Keep,’ which stood on a rising ground above the village. Little was left of it save the vast hollow shell, the roof of which the storms of recent winters had so grievously shattered that not even the cattle now repaired thither, as of old, for casual shelter. Still, even to the present time, there was a winding stair that led to the upper chambers, one of which still boasted of a covering, though of nothing else. The walls were crumbling, the floor had huge gaps in it, and the tall and narrow casements had neither glass nor shutter. Yet to this spot Master Richard now repaired, in somewhat the same spirit—or with as much of it as was possible to him—as that with which the pilgrim seeks his shrine.

His mind was not likely to be distracted by the presence of other worshippers ; the place had grown so dangerous that it was forbidden to the children of the village,

with whom for generations it had been a favourite haunt ; nothing but the summer breeze wandered over the decaying pile, or stirred the grasses that grew in its clefts and hollows. From the top floor could be seen a panorama of the surrounding country, which, save for the oasis formed by Talbot Tower and Park, and in a less degree by the spinney in which Lucy's cottage was situated, was flat, treeless, and uninteresting. On one side, indeed, there was the eternal glory of the sea ; but even that was marred by the intervening marsh-land and the yeasty river which was fighting between its muddy banks with the incoming tide. To Dick, however, no spot on the earth's surface had so poetic a charm. For in this room he had given his Lucy the first kiss of love.

Of course they had kissed one another as children. But when they had met on his return from Eton, one vacation, this pleasant little ceremony had somehow been omitted by tacit consent. And then again,—after some interval—as they had stood

one day at that old window together, looking in silence on sea and sky, it had been renewed in a more tender fashion. Never afterwards, when occasion served, was it again intermitted, but the memory of that first kiss abode with Dick, and kept its sweetness. He was thinking of it now, as he stood alone in that ruined chamber, though not to the exclusion of another thought. Lucy would be home on the morrow by five at latest, and he would stroll down to the village and drop in at the spinney to ask after his foster-mother, as it was only right and proper he should do. Even if she was within, there was kitchen as well as parlour in the cottage, where one could say, 'How are you?' to a body in private; and even if she was not in (and somebody else was), that disappointment would be supportable. Indeed, though of a yielding nature and fond of Master Richard (as was natural considering the relation between them), Mrs. Parkes was by no means so disposed to throw the young people together as was her husband.

At the very moment that Dick was forecasting the future in this pleasant manner, he saw a tall, stalwart figure emerge from the little wood and make for the village. He knew him at once for George Parkes, because of that slouch in the shoulders, which had cost George so dear in the days when he had been a breaker, instead of an administrator of the game laws. ('I could have sworn to him among a thousand, your worship,' was what was always said by the witnesses for the prosecution.) If George was not the rose (which, indeed, he was not, so far as fragrance went, for when he did not smell of ferrets he smelt of rabbits), he was near the rose in Richard's eyes ; and at the sight of him that young gentleman ran down the ruined stairs at headlong speed.

'Well, George, how are you ?'

'How goes it, Master Richard ?' replied the giant. He would have been six feet five had he been upright ; his face was apple-red from exposure to all weathers, but it was not the frank face of a country-

man. It had a dogged look even now when he would fain have worn one of deferential welcome. Not that he had any desire to play the hypocrite, for he was really glad to see the lad ; but things had gone against the grain with him so long that to wear a look of conciliation was a physical impossibility with him. Moreover, something had occurred quite recently 'to put him out.'

Though long past middle-age his beard was black, and the fire of his roving eyes untamed. In his youth he had been feared by man and loved by woman : but the fear was all that now remained to him of strength. When that should wane, he felt in his vague way that he should be weak indeed, and it behoved him to keep up his prestige while time permitted it. What nature had intended him for was a Robin Hood of a coarse type ; but having been born a few hundred years after his due time, he had become—after some very serious vicissitudes, and thanks to the good offices of Richard rather than to his own merits—the Squire's gamekeeper.

‘I was just thinking of you, young sir,’ he continued, ‘by reason of a letter from my missus.’

‘Ah, she spoke of having seen me in town, did she? She is coming home to-morrow, of course?’

‘Yes, *she’s* coming, right enough; but not the other.’

‘What on earth do you mean, George? Lucy is not staying behind her?’

‘Yes; just that. I knew you’d be riled about it.’

‘Riled! Well, of course I like Lucy to be at home; but what has happened? I suppose if you expressed a wish to Mrs. Parkes——’

‘That Mrs. Parkes would gratify it,’ put in the other grimly. ‘Well, yes, I think so. But Miss Lucy is not my daughter, you see, and has a will of her own.’

‘Then she stays at her own wish,’ said Dick, compressing his lips.

‘Well, it is my opinion there has been a plant to keep her up in town.’

‘A plant?’

‘Yes. You see everybody is not so trustful of you, Master Dick, as I am. They think it’s dangerous for young folks like you and Lucy to be much together ; and so the gal has been “got at.” It’s your aunt as has done it—at least that’s my idea.’

‘My aunt? Aunt Edith?’

‘So I read it. My missus writes as Susan told Miss Talbot that Lucy had a talent for singing, and now it seems it is to be brought out. She’s to be put in a choir where her organ (that is what Susan says, but bust me if I understand it) can be deweloped.

‘That’s a mere excuse for keeping her in London!’ exclaimed Richard vehemently.

‘Ain’t I been a-telling you so all along? Now what I say is that a choir is a bad place for a young girl. The company is too mixed, and has got too many opportunities of mixing.’ And Mr. Parkes drew himself up (all but his slouch) to express the severity of his moral views.

‘You couldn’t write and say that you object to the arrangement?’ observed Richard doubtfully.

‘Well, of course I could; or rather my missus could write it for me. But what would be the good of that? If Lucy don’t mean to come, she won’t. I ain’t her father; and as for her mother, she don’t care a button about her.’ Here Mr. Parkes suddenly recollected that he must not paint his picture of the young woman in a too unflattering way, and added, in explanation, ‘not that she ain’t fond of the missus—indeed she doats upon her; but she’s just at that age when a girl likes to have things her own way; when they’re married to husbands of the right sort, their mouths get soft enough, and one can guide ’em with a snaffle.’

This prospect of matrimonial ease was far too distant to afford Mr. Richard Talbot any consolation for his present disappointment.

‘My father’s right! she’s a Jesuit,’ he exclaimed with irritation.

‘Well, no, Master Richard ; I wouldn’t go for to say that. She’s a little wild and coltish, but there’s no vice about her ; and if you only know how to play your cards——’

‘Tush, I was not speaking of Lucy.’ Dick turned away abruptly from his favourite giant, and at once began to retrace his steps towards home. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and nature in her robe of green was smiling around him as before ; but for him there was no light, no music, no colour, in either earth or air ; and man and woman (especially woman) were grown false or schemers. The whole arrangements of the universe were out of gear in his eyes, because Miss Lucy Lindon was about to develop her talents for vocal melody.



CHAPTER XI.

A FINE OLD ENGLISH GENTLEMAN.

THERE are a good many people who have no high opinion of letters, who yet believe in them when tacked to a man's name. V.C. (when they do not stand for Vice-chairman, in which case they are not always creditable) are deservedly held in estimation ; K.C.B. are valuable adjuncts ; and even F.R.S. have their admirers. But in the country there are no letters which 'in this connection' (as cousin Jonathan phrases it) are so exceedingly esteemed as M.F.H. When a man has once been a Master of Foxhounds he can hope for no higher dignity ; but is like a Lord Mayor who has passed the chair. To this eminence had

Mr. Reginald Pole, of Masham Manor, the estate contiguous to that of Talbot Tower, attained in years gone by, and the knowledge of it excited a reverence in Master Richard Talbot's mind, which I am afraid it would have refused to higher claims upon it. The old gentleman, moreover, had been always good to him ; had often given him the proceeds of a rubber at whist, as a knight of old used to dispense the gains of his skill in tourney to some favourite page ; and had mitigated the melancholy of many a vacation at the Tower by an invitation to the Manor.

It seemed strange to many, and to Mr. Freeman in particular, that Mr. Talbot permitted his son to visit at such a house, where not only cards, as the reverend gentleman put it, 'had their attractions,' but most of the pleasures of this world were to be found in profusion, and but little was thought of the next. It was only a part of the inconsistency which, as I have said, Mr. Talbot had exhibited of late years in respect to his son, whose very presence at

the Tower seemed at times unwelcome to him ; but it was a very striking example of it. For, to say truth, it would have been a compliment to call old Reginald Pole 'little better than one of the wicked.' He was fatter than Falstaff by many pounds—for years no horse could have carried him, even if the resources of science could have contrived a machine to lift him into the saddle—and he had grown more 'carnal' with his increasing bulk. If he had lived a town life he must long ago have come to the end of it, but the country air, and exercise (while he could take it), and the general wholesomeness of his surroundings, had counteracted the effects of a course of existence which the term 'fast' would have described but feebly. He had run through two large fortunes, and 'please Heaven,' was his own pious statement, 'he would run through a third, if only time enough were granted to him.' There were stories afloat to the disadvantage of his conscientious observance of the truth, but in this respect he was a man of his word. As

nothing could stop him, his heir and grandson, Henry Pole, took the wisest course that was left to him, by residing at the Manor, where he was very welcome, and taking his share of the good things while they were still going.

Old Reginald himself belonged to the same generation as Algernon Talbot, but he had been much more intimate with Francis (in his wild days) than with his father. They had heard the chimes at midnight together very often, and it was understood, when the younger man had become convinced of the error of his ways, that he had made a very earnest appeal to the elder to turn from his evil courses ere it should be too late. His reply had been brief, but characteristic—'Dear Frank, I never hedge.' The two men had not met since, save once or twice upon the road, when they did not exchange a syllable. But neither felt for the other any harsher sentiment than pity. Mr. Pole thought his old friend a fool for being frightened at a shadow, and giving up 'cakes and ale'

while in Mr. Talbot's eyes this old man, who clutched at gauds (or worse) upon the brink of the grave, was nothing short of a madman ; but the tender touch of old companionship was felt by both.

'If you will let your boy come over to the Manor he will find some young friends. I shall not *bite* him,' old Reginald had written a few months after their estrangement, and Mr. Talbot had permitted his son to go. Invitations had come since again and again with the like result. But when one came from the same quarter some weeks after Dick's final return from Eton, Mr. Talbot hesitated as to what he should reply. He was conscious that the boy had now reached an age when not only bad example would be injurious to him, but the lax views of life and conduct prevalent in the society he would meet under Mr. Pole's roof might leave a permanent impression on him. He had, he felt, shut his eyes to this matter long enough, indeed, too long ; and yet, ever since he had made that confession to the

lad respecting the duel (though not on that account), Dick's presence had become more and more embarrassing to him. It was strange, indeed, that he should wish to part with one so dear to him, but just as a man sometimes prefers a picture dearer to him than all other things he has, yet one which he shrinks from looking on, and hangs a curtain over it, by reason of certain associations it evokes, so was it with Francis Talbot as respected his son. He would have been glad of the excuse of his former friend's invitation to get Dick away, and be left to himself, and his grim theology and grimmer thoughts, but, on the other hand, his conscience pricked him, feeling that such a visit would not be good for the lad. In this perplexity Mr. Talbot resolved to consult the Rector, who, he was well aware, would hold a strong opinion upon the subject, and confirm him by the expression of it in the right course. To need an ally in such a matter was, of course, a proof of weakness; but, on the other hand, he called him in to correct what he

knew to be amiss in himself, and to override the arguments of his own feelings. Directly he had sent for him he repented of it, and had half a mind to recall the messenger, and when Mr. Freeman came he could have found it in his heart to feign another cause for having sent for him. Instead of putting the case before him, as he had intended to do, for his unbiassed judgment, he even began to press upon him some arguments in favour of Dick's going to Masham, that had had in fact but little force even with himself, and that he well knew would be as dust in the balance in Mr. Freeman's mind when weighed against the dangers to which the young man's principles would be exposed, and which, when even he was a boy, the Rector had painted in 'colours of eclipse.'

'You see, Freeman, the boy feels lonely here ; indeed, I have never seen him so out of spirits as during this first week of his summer holidays. There are no out-of-door sports to occupy himself in, and at home, Heaven knows, he finds no bright

companion. At Masham, on the contrary, there is Henry Pole himself, and his sister Margaret, and moreover, on this occasion, an old schoolfellow of Dick's, one Leonard Greene, a young man of talent, who is already at St. Clement's, where he will be in October ; and one can't shut a lad up in the Tower, like a young prince in a fairy tale, so that no person can get at him.'

'Of course not,' said the Rector, rather unexpectedly ; 'and, indeed, there may be harm even at the Tower. You are wrapped up in your own pursuits, and the boy is left not only to himself, which, as you say, affects his spirits, but perhaps even to worse company, such as grooms and gamekeepers.'

Mr. Talbot winced at this, for he saw in the last word a reference to Mr. George Parkes. He had made him gamekeeper at the earnest intercession of young Richard when he was a mere child, but at a time when his wishes had had far greater influence with him than at present. Dick only knew that he was asking for preferment for

a dear companion, who had a better acquaintance with birds and beasts than any natural history book, and could find a wren's nest or a lark's with equal facility ; nor were Mr. Talbot's habits such as to make him conversant with the man's character more than with that of any other humble tenant of the estate. But his compliance with his son's request had been little short of a public scandal. Mr. Parkes had been more than once not only 'in trouble,' but its consequences, in prison ; he had been hitherto a terror, not to evil-doers, but to the guardians of public order, at all events, as regarded the woods and fields ; and he had married the prettiest widow in the parish at a period most unfashionably immediate upon his first wife's death—within, indeed, six months of it. It was this last impropriety, much more than his poaching propensities, that had made the first person in the parish (next to Mr. Talbot, and who, I need not say, was the Rector's wife) most bitter against him, and she had done all in her power to get

the appointment cancelled. But her zeal had outrun her discretion. She had caused her mouthpiece, the Rector, to make his remonstrance in such vehement terms as had annoyed the Squire, in whom something of the old leaven of obstinacy that had helped to estrange him from his father still remained. The comely Mrs. Parkes had come up to the Tower to plead her husband's cause, not upon its merits indeed, but on the ground of her connection with Dick in his earliest years; and would, perhaps, have failed, but for Mrs. Freeman. That lady could not avoid remarking on that visit—it was not, perhaps, in female nature to refrain from doing so—in quarters through which it afterwards came round to the Squire's ears, that it would be shameful if he listened to the prayer of beauty instead of the voice of justice, which had naturally the very contrary effect to that which was intended. From that moment there had been a breach—so far as breaches are possible among 'the elect'—between the Squire and the Rector's wife, and the

subject of George Parkes was always a sore one with him.

‘I am not aware that Richard has contracted harm from any of my servants, Mr. Freeman,’ said the Squire stiffly.

‘Nor I,’ said the Rector; ‘but he has now reached a time of life when he may easily do so. It is probable that he may be soon turning his thoughts in the direction of the opposite sex, and it is most important, even as a temporary measure, and supposing that nothing should come of it, that he should form some virtuous attachment.’

The Squire stared, as well he might, for if this recipe had ever occurred to him, it had certainly not done so in connection with Dick.

‘Why, the boy has hardly left school, Freeman.’

‘That is true, my friend, but it is not too soon to give his thoughts on such matters a good direction. Now, there is Margaret Pole, as you say, as well-principled a young woman in a conventional sense—for, alas!

who is there in her position of whom we can speak as having a real knowledge of the Truth?—as is to be found in this neighbourhood, notwithstanding her frivolous surroundings; if Richard should take a liking for her—for we need suppose no more than that—it would act as a life-belt to a weak swimmer. He would be sustained above the waves of passion; and in due time, even if the matter should go no further—you are the best judge of the advisability of that—he could be trusted on the tempestuous ocean of life alone.'

Not one word had the Rector uttered concerning the wiles and fascinations of the world as exhibited at Masham; not a syllable concerning 'Belial,' as he was wont to term Mr. Reginald Pole. The company at the Manor might have been a Young Men's Improvement Society for aught that he had to say against it. Mr. Talbot was fairly staggered by this unlooked-for falling in with his own secret wishes, and half expected some crushing addenda—a favourite dialectic manœuvre with the Rector—which

should sweep away all these roseate views in a stern outburst of condemnation.

He would not have been so well satisfied with his companion's views had he guessed that the Rector's wife was preaching to him through the lips of her husband. Mrs. Freeman had no more suspicion than her neighbours that there was anything 'serious' between 'Master Richard' and Miss Lucy Lindon ; she never went near the spinney, nor had she any certain knowledge of what went on at it ; but ever since Mrs. Parkes had got the advantage of her with respect to that piece of patronage in connection with the Woods and Forests, she felt that she was a designing woman, and would stick at nothing to gain her ends. She had also, of course, seen Lucy in the village, and acknowledged to herself that, though she had 'not a feature when you took her to pieces,' she was just that 'taking' sort of young person who drag so many innocent youths of the other sex into perdition through their meretricious attractions. It was impossible, of course, that

any mischief could have been done yet ; but in her opinion it was high time that Master Richard should mix with female society of his own class, and she had of late strongly urged upon her husband the necessity of this step, with a special reference to Miss Margaret Pole. Her own surviving daughter was ten years older than Dick, in spite of which disparity in years she would not, perhaps, have hesitated to save the Squire's son by that agency had not her dear Mary also been married. Had she been still single, Mrs. Freeman would doubtless have looked upon the attractions of Masham Manor with apprehension ; but, as it was, they were infinitely less dangerous in her eyes than the fascinations of low-born beauty.

It is doubtful whether the Rector went all the way with his wife upon this momentous question, but he had had such unpleasant experiences of going in the contrary direction that he dared not neglect this opportunity of stating her views, and they were eminently satisfactory to the Squire.

As to Dick, the disappointment he suffered in Lucy's absence had made Durnton well-nigh intolerable to him, and caused any place to seem preferable to his own home. Love was, of course, the paramount passion with him ; but next to it were the charms of friendship, and Masham had on this occasion an unwonted attraction in the presence of Leonard Greene, a far-away cousin of the Poles, who had been invited to spend some part of his long vacation at the Manor. The bond of their friendship was somewhat inexplicable, except on that ground of ' thy unlikeness fitting mine,' by which the poet somewhat paradoxically accounts for a similar phenomenon in his own case.

Talbot, though he had plenty of wit, or at least of the high spirits and ready speech that in boyhood passes for it, was ignorant of books, and despised them. He was as fond of hunting and shooting as a Pawnee, though, as we have seen, with a weakness towards the squaws (or one of them) that would have been derogatory to the cha-

racter of the noble savage ; while Greene was devoted to all kinds of literature that were not imposed upon him by his tutors, and to some which were absolutely forbidden by them. At cricket and football he was a very indifferent performer, but could play on the piano like a young lady, and sing songs that were far beyond, or, at least, outside of any young lady's *repertoire*. His wit was so lively and natural that no punishment that could be devised by his schoolfellows (nine out of ten of whom detested 'facetiousness' as a beggar hates a lord) could drive it out of him. Their revenge was to call him 'Tommy'—not after Tommy Moore, whom in his diminutive stature and accomplishments he really somewhat resembled—but, after the wicked hero of the nursery ballad, Tommy Greene, who had put pussy down the well ; and this epithet of 'Pussy' clung to him (and annoyed him) down to his dying day.

He had been for a couple of terms at St. Clement's, Cambridge, where he had already found a general welcome, which,

to say the truth, had been denied to him at school, and had distinguished himself in the eyes of the authorities for an epigram, which had almost caused his rustication. On the great festival of the Church in connection with the return of Charles the Second of pious memory, he had struck off the usual printed statement on the hall-screen all the words after *gratiâ*, and substituted the following lines :

‘For the sake of him who sold
Dunkirk to the French,
And gave away the gold ‘
To a naughty little wench,’

and he had been detected in that very act by the master of his college.

‘That—aw—screen—aw—young gentleman’ (such was his observation) ‘is not for the—aw—promulgation of your political sentiments.’

With which reproof the affair would have ended, but that Pussy, instead of bowing to this obvious truth, had been foolish enough to argue the point on the highest principles;

for he was a Radical and Republican to the back-bone, as is the case with many a bright young boy till he comes to mix with the full-grown ones of the same way of thinking.

Dick could, perhaps, have persuaded his father to ask Greene to stay at the Tower, but he had somehow shrunk from doing so. Things were so very different at home from what they were elsewhere, and many of them, he felt, would be so extremely obnoxious to his young friend. He had a suspicion, too, that the latter would find out within the first twenty-four hours the attraction that drew him to the spinney, and it was probable that even the sacredness of the tender passion would not restrain Mr. Greene's inclinations for satire.

If matters at the Tower were not much in Pussy Greene's way, those at the Manor were hardly more so. The atmosphere there was, metaphorically, horsey; the saddle-room was a more important apartment than the study, and the books that

were most highly prized amongst the male society who frequented the place were of a shape unknown to 'the Row,' and provided with a metallic pencil. Mr. Reginald Pole had possessed, as a young man, a great stud of race-horses, by the aid of which he ran through a large estate in one of the shortest periods on record. He had then married an heiress, and, made wiser by experience, had kept hounds instead of horses; but he had, unfortunately, still continued to back his own opinion on the turf, and it had seldom proved a judicious one. Within ten years he had found himself as poor as before. But mark how noble deeds, even though materially unsuccessful, will bear their fruit. He continued to be immensely respected on account of the money he had lost, and the splendid way in which he had got through it. He had lost his wife, too; and this, though he himself bore the calamity with a dignified calm, which by some vulgar persons was even taken for indifference, made him naturally an object of interest. And then

there was none of that vile *appearance* of poverty about him, which is what alone makes it abhorrent to good society. Mr. Reginald Pole continued to eat and drink of the very best, and, indeed, as time grew on, developed his tastes for the table in quite an extraordinary degree. This weakness (if it may be called so), combined with a diminution in his habits of horse exercise, caused him to grow enormously stout. With every year he added to himself, like a stately tree, a certain 'ring,' or additional excess of girth, so that an observant eye could have accurately estimated his age, after fifty, by his rotundity. Sorrow had no effect on it whatever, though this fine old gentleman had had his troubles. His only son died when a very young man, though not before he had married and begotten two children—Henry and Margaret—now grown up, and resident with their grandfather at the Manor. And still the old gentleman ate and drank without stint, taking everything (good) as he found it, and never indulging in bad language

(though he *had* been an M.F.H.) unless irritated. The reward of all this patience and philosophy came to him when he was about sixty-five years old (and many feet in circumference) in a third fortune, which dropped to him unexpectedly from a distant relative ; and at an age when many men of weaker digestive powers are beginning to think of their latter end Mr. Reginald Pole began life anew.

His views of happiness were mitigated by circumstance, but were in the main unchanged ; his capabilities of enjoyment were curtailed, but what was left of them he fostered to the uttermost, and, mindful of the briefness of his mortal tenure, instead of paying off the mortgages with which he had encumbered the estate, this noble-hearted old fellow spent his income like a prince to the last shilling, and even beyond it. He was far too prudent to squander his money on what are called 'improvements' in his farms or houses, which at his time of life would have been folly indeed, but he caused the Manor, as his

mansion was called, which had fallen into rather a dilapidated state in the time of his troubles, to be thoroughly refurnished, and all the grounds about it to be put in order. The paddock, in which a couple of racing colts were generally to be found, was an object of his special solicitude ; the hothouses were kept in a state of great perfection, for pineapples were his favourite fruit, and grapes were recommended by his medical adviser—but, curiously enough, there was no such thing as a croquet-ground at Masham. Vulgar people said this was because Mr. Pole did not play croquet ; but the reason was well understood among the better class to be that this fine old English gentleman objected to such modern innovations (which he termed, generically, French fal-lals), and wished everything about his ancestral home to be in the fine old English style. It was, doubtless, his innate respect for age that caused him to insist upon being helped first, even before the ladies, at his own table, as well as at those of other

people who entertained a proper sense of his importance ; and to see him dining with a napkin under his chin and his own body-servant (a young fellow who had a very strong family resemblance to him) was really a picture of human happiness—and on a large scale—that made the heart leap up for joy. Leonard Greene used to say (but this was in later years), that when vexed by thoughts of the ill-fortune of the wise, and the poverty and discomforts of the good, the thought of old Reginald's prosperity was always a comfort to him, because it seemed to restore the average.

Such was the host who, without rising from his arm-chair—a feat indeed which, without extraneous assistance, would have been an impossibility—welcomed Richard to Masham. His left hand, as usual, held his snuffbox, and his right *Bell's Life*, so that the usual form of salutation was dispensed with; but he gave him a cordial greeting nevertheless, asked good-humouredly after his father, offered him a pinch of his 'prince's mixture,' and, when he had

done sneezing, sent him into the garden, 'where he would find the two girls and the "exotic" netting,' an expression which conveyed Mr. Pole's contempt for the effeminacy of Mr. Leonard Greene on the one hand, and for the new-fangled amusement of lawn-tennis on the other.



CHAPTER XII.

A SERIOUS REHEARSAL.

WHO 'the girls' were to whom Mr. Pole had made such curt allusion, Richard did not know; or, rather, the use of the plural puzzled him. The only young lady whom he had expected to see was Margaret Pole, a plump and pretty girl of eighteen, who entertained the erroneous idea that violent exercise would prevent her growing fat, and who had taken to lawn-tennis, as it were medicinally. Her complexion was colourless as cream, with something moreover soft and luscious about it, which reminded one of that commodity; it also suggested, especially to those who knew her grandfather, that in the churn of Time

she would become of a still firmer consistency; but at present she was all that she should be in point of form, with none of those angularities which, particularly in the region of the elbows, are wont to detract from the charms of her contemporaries.

‘My dear Richard, you are come just in time to save Leonard’s life,’ said she, ‘for we are killing him between us. Oh, I forgot you don’t know my friend: Mr. Richard Talbot, Miss Meredith.’

The young gentleman brought his feet together (for boxing and deportment had been his two extras at Eton), and executed an elaborate bow.

‘Now don’t waste your strength, my dear boy, in polite athletics,’ shouted Greene; ‘here’s your racket, and you’re in on my side.’

But to this the ladies would not consent. They had scored six to Mr. Greene’s one, and they objected to any assistance being given to their victim till he should have been completely subdued. So Richard sat on a garden-bench to see the game out.

It offered little excitement in itself, for it was less a contest than a massacre, but an opportunity was thus afforded him of taking stock of the unknown player. Miss Meredith was a year or two older than her friend, much taller, darker, and more strongly built, though not so plump; and she was as agile as a panther. Her back hair had escaped from its fastenings, and was streaming behind her like a comet.

Mr. Greene had drawn her attention to this fact in hopes to mitigate her activity; he had even pretended that the comet had gone over the wall; but, as it happened, it was an ornament of nature's own, and she knew better. The suggestion had only made her laugh a little, and Mr. Greene himself a good deal, which placed him still more at her mercy. It was piteous to see how the little man flew hither and thither after the ball, and when he was lucky enough to hit it, always sent it into the net, or out of bounds. At last, however, to his infinite relief, he was beaten, and lay on the sward with his racket crossed

over his breast, like a dead crusader, till a footman came with the claret cup, which revived him.

To behold the young people enjoying this agreeable beverage, under a spreading beech tree on the velvet lawn, was a pretty sight; very different, thought Richard, from anything to be seen at Talbot Tower, and his spirits rose within him. Hitherto they had been only sustained by a sense of injury, which is not a good substitute for cheerfulness. He thought Lucy had behaved ill to him in remaining in town to develop her organ of melody. She had broken no promise to him, it was true, as to returning to Durnton; but then, they had neither of them entertained a doubt as to her coming home with her mother. He had shown his ill-humour, as he thought, by not writing to her; whereas, since he had never written but once to her before (to tell her he was coming from Eton to see her in Ford's Alley), his silence perhaps did not seem to her a matter of reproach; while as to her writing to *him*—and at the

Tower too—that had not entered into either of their minds. They were aware of the conventionalities of the world, though they did not pay them due respect, just as Pussy Greene used to say of his own laughter-loving nature, that ‘it knew the laws of gravity, though it did not obey them.’ At Durnton—with the exception of the Rector’s wife, who was not calculated to form a substitute for his fair enslaver—there was no female society whatever, so that his present circumstances had all the charm of novelty, in addition to their intrinsic attraction.

It is impossible, of course, for the faithful swain to forget the absent object of his love, but it is less necessary for him to be always thinking about her, when he is surrounded by young persons of her own sex. It may be said, perhaps, that they should only serve to remind him of her; but in the present case it so happened that neither Margaret nor Miss Meredith did this. They had not a single characteristic in common with Lucy, and of course

could not converse with him about a young lady, however interesting, of whom they had never heard. Richard not only felt 'at home' in the ordinary sense at Masham, but experienced that sensation of security and repose which only a visit to a country house, where we are welcomed as one of the family, and 'worn as an old glove,' perhaps affords. This gives a great advantage to the country over the town in all matters of courtship; and is the reason why girls in the provinces 'go off'—though it is true not always eligibly—so much more easily than in the Metropolis. The homely comforts of a rural residence, and the quiet of its surroundings (and perhaps also the absence of much else to do), seem to suggest serious love-making and ideas of settlement in life.

Richard, of course, was but a boy; and, besides, as he considered, bespoken; but it seemed to him somehow that it would be very pleasant to stay at Masham, ever so long, with these two nice girls and Pussy Greene. He had had his share

of the claret-cup, it is true, but that only, as it were, sublimed his sentiments. Sitting on the grass at the (four) feet of beauty, and smoking his cigar—for Pussy declined to begin tennis again till nature had been invigorated by tobacco—his eyes wandered over the well-kept gardens, with the broad water beyond, in which the carp slept, and then to the tall elm trees, with the spire of the village church among them, with a content of which a few hours ago he would have deemed himself incapable. He was not called upon to talk, but it was pleasant to listen to the lively badinage which his friend carried on with Miss Meredith, and in which 'he got as good as he gave.' The occasional glance of significance—'How well those two are getting on together,' it said—which Margaret Pole bestowed upon him, was very agreeable to Dick, and he felt altogether less lovelorn, disgusted, and wronged than he had done since Lucy had failed him. At the lawn-tennis he had Margaret for his partner, and he could not help acknowledging to him-

self what a very nice partner she made ; not that she was very good at the game, being soon put out of breath, and not distinguished by activity, but the very way in which she missed the ball and called herself 'so stupid' had somehow an attraction in it ; while as for the score, he was such a superior player to poor Greene that they obtained an easy victory in spite of Miss Meredith's noble exertions.

It was touching to see how that young lady now stood by her inefficient ally, and strove to defend him from the jeers of his antagonists ; like one who feels another dependent on him for support, she made quite superhuman efforts to make up for his shortcomings, and when they failed, exhibited a sort of maternal solicitude about him, which, I am sorry to say, was an object of jest to the victors. The fact was that, though Mr. Leonard Greene had been but a few days at Masham, Margaret's keen eyes had noticed a budding attachment between him and her friend, which should have aroused her tenderest sym-

pathies, only it was so ridiculously incongruous. Anne, or Annie Meredith was a sort of Diana Vernon in her way ; had brought a groom as well as a lady's-maid to the Manor, and a couple of riding-horses on which (or, at 'least, on one of which) she was wont in the hunting season to 'show the way' to many a redcoat. She talked about mares and fillies with exactitude, while to Mr. Greene a horse (like Wordsworth's primrose) was a horse and nothing more—except, indeed, that it also seemed to him a dangerous quadruped, often affected with St. Vitus' dance, and always applying crucial tests to the equilibrium of its rider. Yet between these two quite a serious flirtation had sprung up, to the admiration of all beholders :

'Love took up the harp of life, and smote on all its
strings with might,
Struck the chord of self, that, trembling, passed in
music out of sight ;'

and in the young gentleman's case so very much so, that he had even gone to the extent of accompanying the lady and her

friend on a riding excursion. They had hopped over a little ditch, which to Greene had seemed impassable, and when Miss Meredith assured him that he could 'take it in a fly,' had answered that he would much prefer to take it in a fly than on horseback. The result had proved that an intelligent man always knows what he can't do at least as well as what he can. Mr. Greene had 'come a cropper.'

With this element of amusement, added to the usual attractions of the Manor, it was no wonder that Dick enjoyed himself under its roof, for fun at a friend's expense (especially if he has been wont to enjoy it at our own) is one of the pleasantest of sensations ; and then he had the advantage of sharing it with Margaret Pole, which enhanced the pleasure immensely.

The four young people stuck together, and made a little coterie of their own at the Manor, which was, however, full of company. Henry Pole had been in the Plungers, till he had grown tired of soldiering—*i.e.*, in about eighteen months—

and sold out; and several 'fellows' from the same regiment were now staying with him at his grandfather's house. The old gentleman never grudged hospitality to the army. Moreover he was a great supporter of the Church—though somewhat like a flying buttress, *i.e.*, he always remained outside of it—and the Rector or the curate of Masham were generally to be found at his table: Mr. Meredith, too, Annie's uncle and guardian, and an old friend of her host's, had come with her (though she needed no chaperon), and gave no signs of quitting his comfortable quarters. He was an excellent fellow, but of a very matter-of-fact cast of mind. The young folks improvised some private theatricals, and though he was no actor, he proved a most admirable ally, and bore the title of General Utility they conferred upon him with great good nature. He would hear them their parts with the utmost patience, and could be always trusted not to annoy them by telling them the missing word just as it was on the tip of their tongues.

Every one knows how soon acquaintance ripens in the glare of the footlights ; what significance a young gentleman can throw into a phrase out of a stage play ; and on what a pleasing footing it sets one with a young person of the opposite sex to have one's cheeks rouged, or one's moustache gummed 'on, by her adroit and dainty fingers. The Plungers, the curate, Henry Pole, and all connected with the green-room felt this influence of Thespi in relation to the tender passion (to which the fact of Miss Meredith being an heiress gave perhaps an additional zest), but Pussy Greene, who was thoroughly at home in the sock and buskin, and never behaved more naturally than when he was acting, fell seriously in love. It was like a family vaccination, in which the majority feel a little temporary inconvenience from the operation, but one will 'take' so very 'favourably' that he is useless for ordinary purposes of life, and can think of nothing but his arm.

A few days before the great performance

to which half the county were invited, was to come off, this young man was taken with quite a paroxysm. He was determined to know his fate; and the chivalry of his disposition induced him to apply to Mr. Meredith, instead of his niece, for the information. He was conscious that he was a poor match for her; he had a few hundreds a year of his own, and she had as many thousands; and he thought it right to take no advantage of his darling's ignorance of the world, and possibly of her inclination for himself. He could have carried her, he flattered himself, by a *coup de main*, but he preferred to lay siege to her in due form, through the approaches of her uncle, guardian, and solicitor. After a late rehearsal and supper, one evening, he happened to find these three gentlemen 'rolled into one' enjoying his cigar in the garden, at the back of the harbour.

'Hullo, Don Cæsar,' was the good-natured greeting (for Greene was in his theatrical garb) 'have you come for a

breath of fresh air to sweep away the smell of the footlights ?'

'Yes, sir ; and for a few words with you, if you will kindly hear them.'

'By all means, my lad. I am quite at your service.' This genial frankness a little dashed the young man ; he thought Mr. Meredith might have had some inkling of his matrimonial intentions, and would have preferred to have been received with a little more stiffness of manner. He therefore threw into his rejoinder a certain gravity very alien to his natural tone, and which he intended to mark the seriousness of the matter in hand.

'My subject, sir, is your charming ward—a young lady for whom, though I have had but a short acquaintance with her, I have the highest respect, regard, and—and—affection.'

'Very good,' said the lawyer. 'Take your time ; don't hurry.'

'You are most kind, sir. Of course it's a little difficult to select the exact words, yet I feel it is so important to do so.'

‘Just so ; exactness is everything. One minute, while I light another cigar—all right.’

‘I think upon the score of family you will find nothing to object to. My parents, unhappily, are dead, but they filled a good, if not a high position in this neighbourhood, and were much respected. They left me, not indeed a wealthy man, but in independent circumstances.’

Mr. Greene paused, expecting the other, perhaps, to ask how much they had left him ; but he only nodded, and said, ‘Go on.’

‘I have not as yet, sir, ventured to express my feelings to the young lady. I felt that I should, in the first instance, address myself to you. But if your permission is given me to speak to her, I am not without a hope that—that——’

‘Take time, take time,’ interrupted the other imperturbably. ‘You are not without a hope that——’

‘Just so, sir—that she herself may not be wholly indifferent to me. It is true we

are both young, but there are circumstances—that is, opportunities—life, sir, I mean, is not measured by moments.’

‘I think you must be mistaken there, Mr. Greene.’

‘Mistaken? No, sir; I may, as I have said, do myself an injustice in expression, but my love for Annie——’

‘Annie!’ exclaimed Mr. Meredith, taking his cigar just in time between his fingers before his jaw dropped. ‘Is it possible that you are talking about my niece?’

‘Why, of course I am. Did I not say so?’

‘My good boy, I thought you were rehearsing your new part; I thought it was a stage play; I thought——’ A roar of laughter burst from the old gentleman as he plumped down on the garden-seat, and was re-echoed from the arbour, in which Mr. Richard Talbot had been ensconced with *his* cigar throughout the interview.

‘I did not know you were an eaves-dropper,’ cried Greene, in a tornado of passion.

‘My dear fellow,’ sobbed Richard, for

his mirth was absolutely hysterical, 'I did not know you were going to talk about private affairs ; and when I found out what it was, and that Mr. Meredith did not understand you, I had not the strength to interfere. I was obliged to stuff my pocket-handkerchief into my mouth——'

'A very nasty trick,' interpolated the other, savagely.

But his enemies only roared the louder.

There are some 'situations' in which the sense of the ridiculous overwhelms all other feelings ; no wit, nor even humour, expressed however happily, can approach them as a laughter-moving cause ; they recur to us quite involuntarily, and often on the most inopportune occasions—by the grave's side, or in the lonely watches of the night—and tickle our very heartstrings. And this misunderstanding between Mr. Greene and the guardian of his beloved object was one of them. His seriousness and ire only fed the flame of mirth in his two companions. They were really sorry for him ; they would have looked grave if

they could, and Mr. Meredith particularly wished to do so, now that he understood the real nature of Mr. Greene's application ; but the very elements of sobriety were shattered within him, and an attempt at speech only produced a new paroxysm of laughter.

'It is all very amusing, I have no doubt,' said the unfortunate suitor, with an air of austerity that was almost the death of Dick, 'but you are now at least aware——'

Mr. Meredith, a stout gentleman to begin with, and by this time quite purple and swollen, held up his hand for silence. 'Not now,' gasped he ; 'my dear sir, not now. Let us talk about it another time.'

'And in the meanwhile you will be telling everybody—you two—and making me the laughing-stock of the house.'

'No, we won't—we won't indeed,' answered the other, with the tears in his eyes. 'Talbot will promise not to tell.'

Dick removed his pocket-handkerchief to give the required guarantee, and then stuffed it back again.

Mr. Greene stalked off without a word, like the ghost in 'Hamlet.' Richard kept his promise, which was fortunate for him, as he was presently fated to be in a position greatly more embarrassing than that of his friend, and in which the reticence of Mr. Greene was of still greater importance to him than his own had been in the other case.



CHAPTER XIII.

A POSTSCRIPT.

‘THE world is small,’ was an observation made to me once by a person who had gone round it ; and the same remark has occurred to others who have stopped at home but looked about them. It is astonishing how constantly (and yet always with a foolish sense of unexpectedness) one knocks against total strangers who are tolerably well acquainted with us, or our belongings. An instance of this happened to Dick on the night on which the theatricals had come off (with complete success). He found himself on a second visit to the supper-table—the visit of business, when the ladies had taken their little pickings,

and gone away—beside an unknown guest. His name is of little consequence, but as a matter of fact it was Townsend, a man about town staying with people in the neighbourhood who had asked leave of Miss Pole to bring their friend ‘to your delightful performances.’

‘I believe I know an aunt of yours,’ said he. ‘Same name, at least’ (he had seen Dick’s in the play-bill), ‘and comes from Suffolk.’

Dick did not think it likely, and with the frankness of his age expressed that view. The stranger had a drawl, and waxed moustachios, which made his acquaintance with Aunt Edith improbable; and then, Dick did not relish telling everybody that she was a Sister of Mercy.

‘If her name is Edith, I am right, however,’ continued this gentleman. “Sister Edith,” she calls herself; living with her relative, Lady Earnshaw.’

‘That is my aunt Edith,’ acknowledged Dick.

‘Thought so; see a family likeness.

The lady knows my mother ; belongs to the same club—I mean Dorcas club.'

Dick nodded. This conversation did not interest him much. Moreover, there was of course a little dancing after the play, and Margaret Pole had promised him the second waltz after supper, and he was nearly due.

'Ever go to church with her—to St. Ethelburga's?'

'Never. It is not much in my way,' said Dick, with a grand air. He meant it to be understood that the established ecclesiastical system had received his best consideration, but had failed to impress him favourably.

'Ah, then you miss something. The singing is the best in London.'

'I don't care for singing—at least not for that sort,' said Dick, with a mental reservation in favour of that art as practised at the music halls.

'But you care for a singer, I suppose, if she is magnificent—I mean to look at. There is a girl in the choir there—her

name is Lindon. I got my mother to ask your aunt about her. By Jove, it's worth going to church three times a day to get a sight of her. But you've seen her, perhaps ?

'Never,' said Dick, with promptitude; and burying his features in the foam of champagne.

'Then you'd better be quick about it. She's quite the rage in London. That is with the few who know of her existence. I should not tell you, perhaps, if you didn't live in the country; but a pretty girl is like a turf secret, it's almost impossible, now a-days, to keep her to yourself.'

'To yourself?' echoed Dick savagely; 'what the devil do you mean?'

The stranger stuck his glass in his eye, and regarded his young friend as though he had been Don Quixote in his armour.

'Well, really,' said he; 'if you constitute yourself the guardian and knight-errant of all your aunt's *protégés* you will have enough to do; not that you need to lay lance in rest against your humble servant

upon Miss Lindon's account. She's a perfect Una for all I know—and most certainly the lion.'

'The lion,' repeated Dick, who, being unacquainted with Spenser, missed the poetic allusion.

'Yes. Her voice has taken captive the town, which means, perhaps, a hundred of her own sex and half a dozen of ours. And it is not a case of *vox et præterea nihil*; she is so charming to look at. One goes not only to hear but to see. The great secret of how to bring the male sex to church has been discovered by this young woman. They get up before daylight—or at least sit up all night—in order to attend matins at St. Ethelburga's. There is quite a mania for ritualism in the Guards' club.'

Dick said 'Indeed' in his stiffest manner, and rose from his seat. He had now no wish to waltz with Margaret, but only to escape from this odious stranger. It was to become a 'lion' in a London choir and to create a *furor* among the household troops, then, that Lucy had deserted him!

She was a vain, egotistic, heartless creature. She had not wasted a thought upon how he had pined for her, and what he had suffered for her sake all alone at Durnton. For all she knew he was at Durnton still. She had forgotten him altogether in that giddy round of pleasure. Well, he would forget her in the intoxications of the waltz. He had been faithful to her up to that moment, but since she could sit in the gallery at St. Ethelburga's and make eyes at men with waxed moustachios, he would have a little pleasure on his own account. With this delicious revenge in view he danced with such unwonted demonstrativeness, that Margaret cried, 'Don't squeeze so, Dick, nor tread on my toes. What makes you so awkward?' She thought he had had too much champagne, and felt quite glad to get rid of him. He left the glittering scene in disgust, and retired to his own apartment. He had read somewhere (I am afraid it was in the 'Trial' in 'Pickwick') about the impossibility of smiling when the heart is seared, and he

felt the truth of the observation. He would tear from his bosom the memory of this graceless girl; it would leave a void, no doubt. Henceforward life would be a blank to him. But what matter?

Then he thought he would write her a few scathing lines, beginning 'Madam,' bidding her farewell for ever. He drew a table to the open window that looked forth on the sleeping woods and waters, and through which came from afar off the sweet tones of 'the flute, violin, bassoon,' and the measured cadence of 'the dancers dancing in tune;' and somehow, as he did so, the recollection of his last walk with Lucy through the spinney at evening came into his mind; he remembered the very words that she had said, and the sweet smile she had given him at parting; and he felt once more the touch of her velvet cheek. She had offered it to him quite frankly, but it was because she loved him; it was not for the lips of the chance-comer, even though they wore waxed moustachios, he now felt sure. How could she

help people coming to church to look at her, poor dear? He might trust Aunt Edith to take precautions that they didn't get into the gallery. No, his doubts had been unworthy of him, and an insult to Lucy. But still he would write her a line.

' DEAREST LUCY,

'Your not coming home on the day you promised was a sad disappointment to me. I have felt very sad and lonely ever since. Your mother seemed to think that it was "better for you" to stay in London, though I could not quite see why. But you are not going to live there, are you? In that case I shall not see you until I pass through town on my way to Cambridge. It is quite out of the way, of course, but I must see you there. I am staying at Mr. Pole's at Masham, where a line will find me. Durnton is intolerable without you. We are going to a picnic on Swanborough Hill on Thursday. Do you remember the Hill?' (Here Dick

sighed and looked so tender, he might have sat for Narcissus making love to himself.) 'How dull and barren it will look now! What are you doing with yourself, and when are you coming back to Durnton ?

'Ever yours lovingly,

'RICHARD.'

Although he wrote thus tenderly, he still felt chagrined at her preferring (for so he termed it, and not altogether unjustifiably, since she could doubtless have done as she pleased in the matter) to stay in town rather than come home. He knew that she had an idea of 'improving herself' in certain ways (which was a ridiculous idea, if she was good enough for him), and had probably seized some opportunity of so doing ; but he purposely ignored this in his note.

'What are you doing with yourself?' was a very vague form of inquiry, and had certainly no reference to her music lessons. Perhaps he had a notion that it would draw from her some explanation of the

attendance of Messrs. Townsend and Co., at St. Ethelburga's. Altogether, though so fond, the epistle was rather of a tentative character.

He had written to her only once before, and she not once to him ; a circumstance which, perhaps, had something to do with their mutual affection. For where there is no epistolary correspondence between two young people, who are always meeting one another, there can be no disagreements—or, at least, misunderstandings. They speak their minds, and if they quarrel, which is difficult in view of one another's personal attractions, they can very literally 'kiss and be friends again.' Or, on the other hand, they instinctively avoid all subjects about which they are inclined to differ. Now in letter-writing, however affectionate we may be, there is a temptation to state what one feels deeply about, even though our correspondent attaches no such importance to it, or even dislikes it ; it seems an opportunity for putting such a matter beyond the risk of mistake with him ; one

is glad to know that it is now in black and white, so that he cannot ignore it, and we do not always reflect that it is therefore all the more calculated to annoy him.

If, because Miss Lucy Lindon designed to marry Mr. Richard Talbot, she is to be termed a 'designing girl,' the term must cling to her. She did design it; it was the idea of her life, though not so monopolising (as it was in Dick's case) but that, even when alone, she could think of other things. But in the sense in which Mrs. Freeman would have applied that appellation to her, Lucy was not 'designing.' She did not love Richard for his money, or his position in the world, though she thoroughly understood its superiority to her own. She loved him for his own sake; as warmly, as wildly as he loved her, but there was more method in her madness. She looked beyond the morrow, and was desirous (in her poor way) to make some preparation for the future. She understood quite clearly what an

enormous obstacle to her union with Richard existed in the person of her step-father, George Parkes ; and she perceived that though there was little social inconvenience in the fact of his wife being Richard's foster-mother, there would be very great objection raised to her becoming his mother-in-law. And again, she was not ignorant of her own very slight qualifications for the position of Mrs. Richard Talbot, of Talbot Tower.

Neither of these two first matters could be mended ; but it was possible, she thought, to make herself less unworthy of her lover—that is in a social point of view ; for she had no mock humility with respect to other things. She knew herself to be very beautiful ; she credited herself with cleverness, good sense, and virtue ; and she loved the lad with all her honest heart. At the risk of exciting more scorn than pity for our heroine, we must confess that she by no means perceived her own unworthiness to its full extent, but imagined (such was her ignor-

ance) that the devotion of her bright young being to a single object (namely, Dick) was not without its material value. Yet, as we have said, she did feel herself unworthy. She knew that in ten thousand things she must presently find herself unsuited for the part she designed to occupy, and in one or two of these, at least, she thought she might improve herself beforehand. In the first place she knew that 'accomplishments' went for a good deal, and being aware that Nature had given her a fine voice, she was desirous to cultivate it. Indeed, she had long nourished a certain ambition in this direction ; it was the only means, as she imagined, she possessed (for the highest value she attached to her beauty at that time was that it pleased Richard) of acquiring distinction, and this it was that had caused her, as we shall hear, to fall a prey to a very simple piece of strategy on the part of Sister Edith.

Richard's letter brought a reply by return of post :

‘DEAREST DICK,

‘I am very glad to hear from you at last, though I see you are angry with me for stoping in London.’ (Poor Lucy did not reckon spelling as an “accomplishment,” or perhaps was ignorant that she did not possess it.) ‘Of corse I would rather be at Durnton ; oh, if I had you by my side, (as the song says) how happy I should feel. But I am sure things are better as they are. Your Ant Miss Talbot—“sister” she calls herself, which is ridicklus, for I don’t think she would like me to be her sister, nor even her niece—has been very kind to me. She heard, it seems, from Ant Susan’ (each of these great ants gave a sting to Dick as he met with them, for though he was no better at spelling himself than any other ordinary Eton boy, there are degrees in these matters) ‘about my singing, and told me what a pity it would be if I did not do what I could to improve my voice. She offered to give me lessons, and Mother and Ant both seemed to wish it. But I said “No thank you,”

because I felt too proud to take the money from your Ant. Then she said I might pay her back again, if I pleased, when my voice began to bring me in money ; so that I need be under no obliggation.' (Here Dick was dreadfully shocked ; he had never felt any 'obliggation' so painful.) 'And then the quire master of St. Ethelburga's came, who called my voice an organ, and said it only wanted reggulating to do all sorts of things. And, dear Dick, I am so happy about my voice on your account ; they say I shall do great things with it ; so that perhaps you will not need to be very much ashamed of your poor Lucy after all. My proggress is something astonishing I am told, and it would be very foolish to neglect such opportunities as I have at present. I am going home for a few hours next week to get my things (for, of course, I had never meant to stay in London), and oh, how sad Durnton will look without you. Only be sure, dear Dick, it is all for the best. Everybody is very kind to me, here ; and Susan,

of corse, and *your* Ant also, I must say (though she is so much too good for yours truly, that she makes me feel quite wicked); and Mr. Gerald Vane (though he has a slite squint). The church is more crowded than ever, all because of my singing; only I wish it was some Theayter instead of a Church, for there would be more chance of seeing you there. Dear Richard I love you so, and you must forgive me for stoping away from you. I sometimes feel that it is better for us every way to be apart just now, and all the more likely that we shall some day meet never to part.' ('What the deuce does she mean by *that*?' thought Dick. 'How *can* it be better?') 'And now, dear Dick, hoping this finds you as well as it leaves me,

'I am for ever and ever, yours fondly,

'LUCY LONDON.

'P.S.—As you say you are going to Swanborough Hill on Thursday, it is just possible we may catch a glimps of one another. The trains I see will just fit in,

so that I can stop an hour or two at the junction ; and I will be under the hill where the camera stands—you know where—at three o'clock, on the chance of seeing you, dear Dick.'



CHAPTER XIV.

THE LOVERS' SEAT.

THE postscript of Lucy's letter seemed to Richard worth all the rest of it, and amply to atone for its bad spelling. He had hitherto looked forward to the picnic at Swanborough as likely to be 'good fun,' but it now presented quite different features to his imagination. Who has not pictured in his mind a promised meeting of this tender kind; mapped out the very spot of the interview; enjoyed beforehand, yet without discounting, its delights; and in the meantime somewhat neglected his business? Our young friend had no business to attend to; he was one of those favourites of fortune whom it is the fashion

with philosophers to pity so much while wishing they were in their shoes, who have no business to neglect : but from that moment he neglected his pleasures. It was fortunate that the theatricals were over, or he would certainly have come under the censure of the stage manager for blunders and inattention. He helped Miss Meredith to chicken at luncheon before Mr. Pole, and even gave her the liver wing, which was the old gentleman's acknowledged property and perquisite.

The rich trail of the woodcocks, the green fat of the turtles, the backbones of the grouse, were always respectfully preserved for this fine old epicure. On one occasion, during the last winter, Dick had given his host the choice of a tit-bit among good things, instead of sending him the tit-bit itself. A landrail, his favourite bird, was in the centre of a dish of plovers, and Dick had said, ' Shall I send you the landrail, Mr. Pole, or one of the plovers ?'

' You young fool, the landrail, *of course*, ' had been the old gentleman's indignant

reply. Dick had thought at the time he should never forget that incident, and the fright it had caused him ; yet now he had offended still more heinously ; he had had no intention of favouring Miss Meredith at her host's expense, but his soul was far from liver wings, and soaring on the wings of love.

The very same afternoon he actually addressed Leonard Greene as 'My dear Lucy,' but fortunately he took it for 'Pussy,' so that no harm was done beyond putting that gentleman in a passion. Greene had not the least idea of his friend's 'infatuation,' as he would no doubt have called it had he been aware of its existence. Young gentlemen do not, as a rule, confide to one another (as young ladies do) their little love affairs, unless they are utterly discreditable ones. Mr. Greene, indeed, had, as we have seen, at one time disclosed his, and yet it was surprising how cool, or perhaps only how prudent, he had grown since that misunderstanding between himself and Mr. Meredith ; it

almost seemed that the tender plant of love had been unable to survive the storm of ridicule in which it had been so unexpectedly surprised. Still, it struck Richard that it would not be unsatisfactory to his friend to get the laugh upon his own side, and he felt quite a shudder at the opportunity he had given him, and which had been so narrowly missed. Not to think of Lucy was impossible, and if he spoke it seemed as if it was almost as impossible not to speak of her, so he kept henceforward a very jealous guard upon his lips. As the hours drew on, he became more and more taciturn, so that by the time the morning of the picnic arrived it was already agreed among his friends that Dick must be in love.

‘It is not with *me*,’ protested Miss Meredith, gaily.

‘*Qui s’excuse s’accuse*,’ said Mr. Greene. It was the first approach he had made to this delicate subject since that misinterpreted confession in the garden.

‘It is not with *me*,’ echoed Margaret; ‘I

have played the *rôle* of elder sister to him so long that our relations are established upon that footing.'

'I don't think that Mr. Richard Talbot is a marrying man,' observed Miss Latour gravely.

This lady had once been Margaret's governess, but was now retained in the establishment in a sort of nondescript capacity which it would have been difficult to define. She was useful as a chaperon to her former pupil, but invaluable to Mr. Pole, because she knew the exact proportions in which certain kindly elements—anchovies, the herbs tarragon and chevril, and cream—were to be mixed in a salad.

The idea of Dick's marrying (at seventeen), and this serious allusion to it, convulsed her audience.

'You may laugh,' returned the old lady, still more gravely than before, 'but I can't help thinking there is something queer about Mr. Talbot.'

Her sole ground for this opinion was

that poor Dick had not fallen a victim to the charms of Margaret, as in her opinion he was bound to have done; she adored her old pupil, whose accomplishments also she felt to be in some sort her own, and the lack of appreciation of them on the part of any male creature as a slight to herself. It is so difficult to avoid wounding the *amour propre* of some people.

Miss Latour, of course, was to be one of the party at the picnic, which was otherwise composed of very youthful and irresponsible elements. Mr. Pole would as soon have thought of going to church as to eat cold viands in the open air with one's plate in one's lap. Indeed, he had no lap.

'You may talk of the spreading beech,' he said, 'but there is nothing so good as the mahogany-tree.'

'And nothing so bad as the banyan,' added Leonard Greene. His wit was rather thrown away at Masham, but in those days he could afford to be lavish of it.

The spot that all agreed upon as the

most suitable for their *al fresco* repast was Swanborough Falls, a Niagara with a drop of about ten feet, and boasting only of a duodecimo volume of water; but in that part of the country objects that could be called picturesque were rare, and Swanborough Hill and Fall had quite a reputation with sight-seers.

On the former, as we have mentioned, science, assisted by the spirit of pecuniary speculation, had erected a camera, in which, during summer-time, visitors, for sixpence a head, had presented to them on a white table all objects in the vicinity, which they could see with their naked eyes for nothing had they remained outside. Dick had visited this establishment himself with Lucy, and paid the admission fees for both out of his own pocket-money. The remembrance of it was in his mind as he took his place, on the morning of the picnic, in the Masham 'break,' a long open carriage drawn by four horses and holding sixteen persons, with two grooms on flying seats, as though they were set there to take

money at the door. Henry Pole was the 'whip,' and had a friend in the Plungers on the box with him.

Mr. Meredith had stopped at home to keep company with his host, and the occupants of the vehicle were, with the exception of Miss Latour, all young people, full of good-humour and high spirits. Dick was no whit behind the gayest of them in this respect; but his hilarity had no sympathy with theirs, for it arose from another source. He was a little anxious, too, as to how he should get the opportunity to slip away from his companions on the hill.

The waterfall was about half way down it, and when the feast had been spread and eaten, and the servants were fallen to upon the *débris*, the company dispersed in various directions: some of the young men to sit and smoke upon the stones below the fall; others to wander over the hill, each with one of the opposite sex; and Miss Latour, like a hen whose chickens have ranged, to look after the proprieties as far as possible.

Dick himself stole away up the bed of the stream, hiding for a minute or two behind a big 'boulder' when he heard Greene calling for him, and pursuing his way when the coast was clear. He felt pretty sure where he should find Lucy—on a rustic bench by the side of the little river, and just under the brow of the summit of the hill—a place called, from its convenient seclusion, the Lovers' Seat.

Nor was he mistaken in this hypothesis. Lucy was waiting for him on this very spot, which, as it happened, he had last visited in her company, and where he had spoilt his clasp-knife in carving her initials on the wooden bench. How changed she looked from the Lucy of that date, and even from her he had parted with but a few weeks ago in Ford's Alley ! She was really perhaps somewhat taller and more womanly, for change in that respect is at her age very rapid, but her air and manner were also far more confident and self-possessed than he had hitherto known them. She received him with her usual affection, and yet with

a certain reserve for which he was at a loss to account.

‘Why, Lucy, my darling, you don’t seem half glad to see me?’ cried he reproachfully.

‘But I am, Dick, very glad,’ she answered; ‘only I am doubtful whether it is right.’

‘Right! Why, what can there be wrong about it?’

‘Well, to have written to you to appoint a meeting as I have done, and to deceive my aunt and mother about the trains.’

‘Well, we’re obliged to do things in a hole-and-corner way, my darling; it’s not our fault, but that of the people that drive us to it.’

‘You mean your father and my own relatives? That is not a pleasant thought for a girl, that all her people (for of course I don’t count my stepfather), and her lover’s people too, are against her marriage. However, I am not quite the noodle I was, Dick. I think I see my way to something like independence. I shall not be a drag

upon you in case you were cut off with a shilling, as my aunt says will be the case if you were to make me your wife.'

'I mean to do that, Lucy, even if I hadn't the shilling.'

'I know you do. You're as honest as the day, Dick : if you were not, I should not be here. But things will not be made easy for us.'

'They won't be made easier by waiting, Lucy. When we are once married we shall be safe : of course there will be a precious row, but what people will feel' (it was significant that he avoided all direct allusion to his father) 'is that it's no use crying over spilt milk. And it's no use crying now, my darling : you'll spoil your pretty bonnet-strings. What a fine dress you have got on, by-the-bye; and how nice you look.'

'Do you think so, Dick ? Well, folks say I have some taste.'

She had a pork-pie hat on, with a bird of gorgeous plumage sitting on the crest ; a gown of bright blue silk, and purple gloves.

‘In London one cannot dress, you know, so quietly as one does in the country. I am paid a salary now, and though there is not much to be got out of the choir business, I am beginning to feel my feet.’

Dick glanced at her bronze boots, which made quite a sunshine in that shady place, and repeated, ‘Feel your feet?’

‘I mean that I am already making my own living, and hope to be in the way of doing much better before long. It is not for nothing, Dick, I do assure you, that I deny myself the pleasure of living at Durnton.’

‘I don’t see how singing in a choir can be any good to you,’ grumbled Richard, ‘and I think you might think of *me*.’

‘That is what I *am* thinking of, Dick ; that is why I leave you all alone at Durnton, and stay myself in Ford’s Alley all this fine summer weather, though I feel sometimes like a bird in a cage, and as though I could sing nothing but “ Let me out, let me out.” It is all for your good, Dick.’

‘Oh, I dare say. That is what I was

told when I was flogged at my first school ; it is what is said generally by everybody who is going to do something unpleasant. I don't believe your living in Ford's Alley is for my good at all.'

'My staying in London *is* for your good, Dick ; that is if your marrying me will be for your good.'

'That it certainly will be,' asserted Richard precipitately, and with the idea no doubt of adding earnestness and solemnity to his asseveration, he formally sealed it with a kiss.

'Be quiet, sir. You have had kisses enough. I say, Dick, it would never do for me to be at the spinney now, and your coming to see me twice a day, as I know you would do. People would begin to talk about us, and if once they did that, measures would be taken to separate us. You would have to go abroad, at once, or stepfather would be sent packing.'

'Then you would come abroad, and marry me.'

'No, I couldn't,' said Lucy, in a tone

that suggested the idea was not unpleasant, though impracticable ; 'one can't marry abroad without being engaged by the parents on each side, nor, I believe, without the consent of one's godfathers and godmothers. There is no such thing as a love-match there, as ours will be, darling ; will it not ?'

'Certainly it will, my pet. I wish you wouldn't wear that bird in your hat, Lucy, its beak nearly put my eye out.'

'Your eye had no business to be there, sir. Why don't you listen to me when I am talking so seriously to you, instead of doing such things ?'

'I can listen best when I am quite close to a person's mouth,' said Richard, with the gravity of one who is expounding a theory of acoustics.

'What I say is, Dick, have patience for a little and trust to me. The more I improve myself——'

'You can't, my darling.'

'Hush ! be quiet. The more I improve myself——'

‘Do it at Durnton,’ broke in the incorrigible Dick. ‘You’ll find improvement enough in my society.’

‘No; quite the contrary, sir. For the present I must stop in London.’

If his was the more impatient spirit of the two, hers was the stronger. It was in a grumbling, but no longer in an antagonistic tone, that he inquired, ‘And how long are you going to take before you are Miss Perfection?’

‘Oh, not so long, perhaps. I want you not to be ashamed of me; perhaps even some day to be proud of me.’

‘I shall never be ashamed of you, Lucy.’

‘That is because you love me; but others would be ashamed of me for your sake. I know there is a great difference—that is in some respects—between me and Miss Pole for example, and the other young ladies with whom you came from Masham this morning. I saw you all going up the hill together. I could not join them, Dick; I came after you all alone.’

There was a pathos in her tone which touched him. Of course she could not have joined them; and of course there was a difference. But how was that to be done away with by her remaining in London? He was not much of a judge of female attire, but it struck him that the pork-pie hat with the bird of paradise feather was a little *outré*, and that her dress generally would, on any other person but herself (who looked beautiful in everything), have been in bad taste. London certainly had not 'improved' her in that respect.

'And now, Dick,' she continued, 'I must go. It has been a great comfort to see you, even for this little time. I have been thinking of nothing else since I got your letter.'

'No more have I,' said Dick, 'since I got yours, darling.'

'That was very good of you, because you have so many other pleasures. You are surrounded by your friends, while I—well, no matter. This meeting will be

pleasure enough for me for months to come. I shall not need this locket to remind me of your dear face. It will never be absent from my mind, just as it looks now.'

There was a pause, during which the young gentleman might have been heard once more to murmur, 'That bird will certainly put my eye out.'

'You had better not come with me any farther, Dick.'

'I will just see you to the top of the hill,' he said.

There was nothing upon it but the camera, and even that without its usual exhibitor. So one more opportunity was offered for a farewell.

'You'll not forget me, Dick?'

Forget her! 'If to dream by night, and think of her by day' was to forget her, 'then, indeed, were she forgot.' If he didn't express his feelings in those terms, his meaning was identical with that of the poet; to his words, too, was added the appropriate action. Once more they em-

braced affectionately, and then she ran down the hill towards the railway station, while he strolled leisurely in the direction of the fall, with the air of a gentleman who has been enjoying the picturesque.

Time had slipped away, however, more quickly than he thought. The spot where the picnic had been held was now deserted; nor could he find any of his party on the hill. He therefore hurried to the spot where the drag with its occupants already stood at the door. It really seemed as though, if he had not put in an appearance at that moment, his friends would have started without him.

‘Hullo!’ he said, ‘I had no idea it was so late.’

On the road to Swanborough he had sat between Miss Pole and Miss Meredith; but he now found himself next the door, with Greene for his neighbour, and Miss Latour opposite to him and looking like a graven image. Everybody was quite silent, and Henry Pole upon the box had a frown on his good-natured face as black as thunder.

'By jingo!' thought Dick, 'there must have been a row of some kind.'

However, conversation was never his *forte*, and just now he had something very pleasant to think about: the vision of his Lucy was still before his eyes. 'I hope the next time I see her,' was his reflection, 'she will not wear that infernal bird in her hat. Love is blind, but that is no reason why the lover should be made so.'

At last the unwonted silence of the company began to force itself upon his attention. He put his hand to his mouth and whispered behind it to his friend and neighbour, 'I say, Greene, what has happened?' It struck him that one of the Plungers might have taken too much champagne and mis-conducted himself, which would account for Henry Pole's evident annoyance.

'*You* ought to know,' whispered Greene, grimly. 'You've put your foot in it, I can tell you.'

'I! What the deuce do you mean?'

'Hush! don't talk about it. You're in

Coventry, my dear fellow. It's compromising one's self to speak to you. You'll hear enough about it and to spare when you get home.'



CHAPTER XV.

BETRAYED BY SCIENCE.

SHORT as his life had been, Mr. Richard Talbot had been 'in disgrace' once or twice before, with various sections of society; but the present was perhaps the first occasion in which he could honestly feel that disgrace was unmerited. He had done absolutely nothing—*nothing*—to cause the obloquy that he now learnt for the first time from Mr. Greene he had incurred from his companions in the break. If they had happened to see him in the gully, sitting side by side with his beloved Lucy, it might be possible indeed—the young fellow blushed at the very notion of it—that his behaviour might have been open

to misconception. But he was perfectly confident—and it may be said at once that he was right—that neither in that situation, nor when he bade his charmer adieu, had he been within range of the human eye.

For the rest of the journey, therefore, he enjoyed the exquisite luxury of a grievance—of suffering under an unjust charge, with the very nature of which he was unacquainted. As a selfish man, when he does go in for an act of self-denial, generally carries it out to extremity, so Dick played the *rôle* of injured innocence for the first time to perfection. He enjoyed it, as a low comedian enjoys beyond measure some unexpected opportunity of sustaining the part of an archbishop or a king. A certain dignity sat upon him, which was at the same time mingled with great politeness. When the carriage stopped he would not let the grooms hold back the door, but stood beside it with extended hand to assist Miss Latour in her descent.

To his amazement she waived him aside with a lofty air, backed upon him (if we

may say so of a movement that was at once deliberate and majestic), and handed her young ladies out with her own fingers. It was the very triumph of deportment.

Pale with passion, Dick rushed away to his own room, whither, as he felt sure would happen, his friend followed him on the instant.

'What the devil does it all mean, Greene? That old harridan' (it was thus he spoke of the domestic chaperon of the Manor) 'would not even let me touch the girls with the tips of my fingers. What have I *done*? There is some frightful mistake.'

'If you can persuade folks of *that*, my dear fellow,' returned the other quietly, 'you ought to be made a queen's counsel upon the spot. You cannot deny that the sun shines.'

'What has that to do with it?'

'Everything. If it had been a cloudy day—but there. If you were to dress in green and lie on the floor, and swear it, no one would believe in your innocence. Innocence is not your line, my dear Talbot.'

‘I don’t say what is my line ; the point is, what is my crime.? I say again, what have I *done*?’

‘I can only swear to what I saw you do.’

‘*You* saw me?’

‘Yes ; but that’s nothing. I should have been shocked and saddened of course, but I should have fondly hoped it would not have occurred again ; only, unfortunately, Miss Latour saw you too.’

‘Confound her !’

‘By all means ; indeed, she was very considerably confounded, I do assure you. Miss Pole also saw you ; Miss Meredith also saw you ; Chandos the Plunger also saw you ; and that was what made it so much worse. If we had been all men, or all ladies, it would not have so much mattered ; but unfortunately the company that saw you were of both sexes.’

‘Saw me *what* ?’ answered Dick impatiently.

‘Well, really, if you force me to say it,’ said Mr. Greene demurely, ‘though I had

much rather not talk of such things.' Here he took out his pocket-handkerchief and wiped his forehead, to express a delicate perturbation of the mind.

'I have done nothing to-day that I am ashamed of,' said Dick, drawing himself up, and speaking with great dignity.

'I have not the least doubt of that, my dear fellow,' answered the other frankly. 'But that doesn't prevent other people, especially the ladies, being ashamed of *you*. You shall hear how it happened from first to last. When we had done feeding at the waterfall, Miss Pole proposed a ramble over the hill, and of course we wanted you to come with us. I hallooed for you myself—only as it happened you were otherwise engaged.'

'I was clambering up the gully,' explained Richard.

'Just so, in search of the picturesque no doubt; so were we. The natural beauties of that hill are very remarkable. On the top of it there is a camera.'

'I know it,' said Dick impatiently.

‘ Then it’s a pity you should have forgotten it at what I may venture to term a crisis. The whole party of us, the three ladies and the Plunger and I, after seeing what was to be seen from the top of the hill, thought we would go inside—I mean inside the camera. The man charged six-pence apiece, and there was no reduction upon taking a quantity. That mattered little, however, because the Plunger paid, only it was a terrible squeeze. I heard Miss Latour whisper in the dark, that if she had known how these scientific matters were conducted nothing would have induced her to venture on such an experiment. However the light came in at last upon a round white table, on which we saw everything depicted as large as life that we had seen outside. Only we were now obliged to look at them ; it is impossible to ignore an object when it is the only one presented to our notice. What a beautiful tree ! What exquisite furze blossoms ! What a sweet cow ! Then there came an object indeed. You know how the servants

dress at Windsor who give twopence to the Life Guardsmen to walk with them on a Sunday, and threepence if they take their arms. Well, presently we saw a girl dressed like that, only much more strikingly. She had a pork-pie hat, with a bird of paradise sitting on it as though it were its nest.'

'Oh, I see,' said poor Dick, with a piteous groan.

'So did we, unhappily; we all saw her.'

'“Here's a lark,” said the Plunger in my ear, “she's got her lover with her.” And so she had; but he was not a Life Guardsman. He was about your height, my dear fellow.'

'It was me,' said Dick, with dignity.
'I own it.'

'It would not make much difference if you didn't,' answered the other coolly.
'We saw you as plain as I see you now. We saw you kiss her.'

'Well, and what then?' inquired Dick savagely.

'I am sure I don't know. We didn't

think of inquiring any further. We were quite shocked and horrified enough as it was. I thought I should have expired with laughter. "There is nothing to laugh at, sir, in this infamous exhibition," observed Miss Latour! "My dear madam," I gasped, "I am not laughing; I am in hysterics." What with the small room, and the warmth of it, and the tightness of his clothes, and the irresistible comedy of the scene, the poor Plunger was almost suffocated; he was quite purple when we were let out. But the ladies were scarlet with indignation. I heard Miss Latour say that your conduct was "shameless," and nobody who had any respect for herself would ever speak to you again. I could not utter a word in your defence, for if I had spoken I should have burst; but I do assure you it's no laughing matter. Miss Latour told Henry Pole, and—by the holy poker, here he is!

There was a violent knock at the door, followed by the entrance of Pole in person.

He was a tall, handsome young fellow, remarkable for nothing but his good-nature,

and the never-ending delight he seemed to take in doing nothing ; but on this occasion there were both purpose and irritation in his air and tone.

‘ I think you have behaved very badly to us, Richard,’ he began ; ‘ indeed, disgracefully.’

‘ That is a hard word,’ said Dick, with an angry flush.

‘ Your conduct deserves hard words, sir. I am no saint myself, nor are the ladies of this household particularly prudish ; but they have been insulted. There is no other name for it. How dare you, sir, carry on a vulgar flirtation under their very eyes in public——’

‘ *In camera*,’ suggested Mr. Greene.

‘ No, no, it was the ladies who were in the camera,’ continued the young squire innocently.

‘ How the deuce was I to know *that* ?’ inquired Dick, naïvely.

‘ That has nothing to do with it. You should not have permitted the possibility of such an outrage to their feelings. You

slip away from the company of my sister and her friends, to go philandering with a young woman that you happen to meet on Swanborough hill——'

'I didn't happen to meet her,' said Dick, stoutly: 'we met by appointment.'

'The devil you did! Then all I can say is that a more impudent and blackguard thing I never heard of. Here's your friend here, I appeal to him—are you not of my opinion, Mr. Greene?'

'Well, really, Talbot,' said 'Pussy,' thus appealed to, 'if it was after you knew we were all going to the picnic that you made arrangements to meet that young person with the bird of paradise——'

'I will answer for my conduct to neither of you,' put in Richard, calmly. 'It is to your grandfather that I am accountable for my behaviour, Mr. Pole; he is my host, not you.'

'Begad, you had better not go to *him*,' answered the young man, haughtily, 'for he's got a touch of the gout on him; and if he does not lay a horsewhip about

your shoulders, you may think yourself lucky.'

'*What!*' exclaimed Richard, starting from the mantelpiece, on which he had been leaning with perhaps some affectation of unconcern.

'Come, come,' said Greene, stepping between Pole and his friend, 'don't let us talk about horsewhips. I know Talbot too well to believe things are quite so black against him as they look.'

'Thank you, Greene,' answered Dick, with feeling; 'you are quite right in supposing I am not the blackguard this gentleman has been so good as to call me.'

'I didn't call you a blackguard; though if you were not under my grandfather's roof, and an old friend of the family, I might have called you much worse. I said your conduct was blackguardly. I didn't see it myself; but you did, Greene.'

Here Mr. Greene began to shake with inward mirth, which, however, as his face was very grave, was taken, let us hope,

for an evidence of deep feeling. He nodded in acquiescence.

'Well, sir, you can't make your friend disbelieve his own eyes, I suppose.'

'I could make my friend understand that I was perfectly justified in what I did,' said Dick; he was very pale, but his tone was firm and resolute.

'What,' said Pole, 'that you had any business to kiss that girl on the hill?'

'Yes, I could,' answered Dick, curtly.

'I don't think it could have been business,' murmured Mr. Greene; 'it looked so much more like pleasure. Still if Talbot has any explanation to offer——'

'I have an explanation; and, what is more, a complete justification,' said Dick; 'and I am going to give it in the proper quarter—to Mr. Pole.' And with that he marched out of the room.

END OF VOL. I.

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